

“Hypnotic soundscapes that draw you in”

Kasper Holten on Haas' *Morgen und Abend*

How did you get to know Georg Friedrich Haas' music?

Holten: When I joined the Royal Opera House a couple of years ago, we were keen to commission works from a number of composers: this house has a proud tradition of commissioning music from British composers, but in recent times maybe less so from European composers. So we looked at the whole spectrum in Europe, and it was quite exciting to see how many great and quite different composers are around at the moment. One of the people whom we instantly noticed because of his previous works – *Bluthaus* for instance, and his courage in tackling that subject, his strong sense of theatricality, his personality and then of course the micro-tonal universe – just made us feel that here is somebody who has something strong to say, who has courage and a sense that he is creating something that we would never have heard before. And we thought that a work by Georg Friedrich Haas would be a very exciting commission for our main stage. Then we learned that a project was already being discussed with the Deutsche Oper in Berlin, with a libretto by Jon Fosse – whom I, as a Scandinavian, naturally know very well. We thought this project was too good to be true, and we immediately jumped at it. I must say that I liked the idea because it is quite different from the British operas we've presented here. The whole universe feels so different, it's so simple – the story of a Norwegian fisherman who is born and then dies. On the surface it could look extremely sparse, even boring. However, the way that Fosse's poetry and Haas' music instil the topic with an incredible sense of poetry, of radicality even, and the way that sparseness actually makes you really enter another dimension, was just very intriguing.

Haas' soundscapes are quite hypnotic and draw you in.

You said that the Royal Opera House has a long tradition of commissioning British composers. So is Haas to some extent a new figure in this cosmos of composers being played in Britain? Why is Haas' music so different from that of British composers?

Holten: It's very hard to describe music in words of course, and it always becomes an intellectual exercise rather than really paying respect to the music. I'm not sure that a composer's identity necessarily has anything to do with nationality or what it says in their passport. But certainly I do think that Haas' music is very special. There are obviously no melodies, but you can't navigate it in the way you normally navigate a modern opera either. It is a soundscape, a sound world, just like Fosse's libretto is not dramatic on the outside, it's not outwardly dramatic in the sense you might expect an opera to be. It has an almost hypnotic effect, and this is the same with Haas. When you listen to it, you're just not quite sure what it is. It feels a bit the way it must feel when you are in exile or when you have been uprooted. You don't quite know how to navigate your way – and yet these soundscapes are quite hypnotic and draw you in. So I would say that Haas is not just different from any composer in the UK I know of, he is different from any composer in the world I know of. And that unique sound world is something we were keen to present.

"I'm an expressionist. I write expressive music."

Georg Friedrich Haas

Hearing the dress rehearsal just a couple of days ago, it became clear that there are not as many microtones in this opera as in other operas and works by Haas. What music were you expecting from Haas?

Holten: When we commission a composer, I expect him or her to do whatever they feel is necessary. I still feel that Haas' world is quite unique, and I do think that we are given that experience. There is something wonderful

about this work, and it really made sense to me when Haas said to us: “I’m an expressionist. I write expressive music.” So while you might look at it as a very intellectual exercise – how to make this sound world work – it is actually a very expressive exercise. And once you understand that, I think you understand it in a quite physical sense when you’re in the audience. I don’t think most of the audience will care about what technique he uses to produce that effect – the effect is nonetheless that you are uprooted and slightly unsure about what you are listening to, and you certainly understand that whatever it is, it has a strong emotional – and I would even say physical – effect on you.

It’s important to remember that really great art is about somebody having something to say.

Commissioning a full-scale opera is quite a big project. What does it mean to commission a full-scale new work for the Royal Opera House?

Holten: When you commission a new work, of course there’s a big element of risk. We have an existing canon, and we even have a number of rarities that are rarely performed but are still masterworks – we can take them off the shelf and we know more or less what we are getting. With a new opera, not only do we have the investment of having a composer and a librettist spend years of their lives developing it, of having singers learn parts that they might never sing again, parts that take a lot of time to study. But also, we don’t know what we’re going to end up with: so it’s a leap of faith.

All you can do is pick people who you think have something to say. We live in a time where it’s all about the user; it’s all about what the audience wants. But it’s important to remember that really great art is about somebody having something to say. So finding extraordinary people who have something so burning that they need to say it, who have something they want to communicate – and then allowing them to do so, trying to support them as best possible in their endeavour to say what they want to say, even if you then risk ending up with a failure, is essentially the key part of presenting new works. It’s very important to remember that when Mozart, Wagner or Verdi

wrote their operas, hundreds – thousands – of operas were being written and then thrown out. Even the first operas of the most famous composers are very rarely performed. Writing an opera involves a huge element of risk, and so does commissioning a work. And unlike when you perform other operas, you don't really know what it is that you have until you put it on stage.

In a time where we use words, numbers and logic to enable us to understand who we are as humans, we really need art as a corrective to that.

But having said that, I'm passionate about letting composers and librettists use this incredible art form, which I think describes the human soul and the human experience in a way that is deeply necessary for us, also in our time. It's important to me that we let our time encounter the medium of opera as well, simply because I think that opera does something that no other art form does. In a time where we use words, numbers and logic to enable us to understand who we are as humans, we really need art as a corrective to that, to remind us that life is irrational, illogical, more than just words and numbers. And opera is a beautiful way to do that.

Do you think that Haas' music and Fosse's words go well together?

Holten: Having heard *Morgen und Abend*, I can't imagine this opera with any other combination than Haas and Fosse. They are both quite expressive and yet sparse – they have that in common. That sparsity, almost austerity of expression, combined with being very expressive and handling the biggest themes that exist – the birth of a child and the death of a person, of a self – is as extreme as it could be, and yet it is cleansed away to the real core of the human experience. I think it all goes fantastically well together. It was funny to hear from Haas that when he received the libretto from Fosse, he had actually not necessarily set the scenes from the book that Haas had expected – the libretto was quite different. But in my opinion it has been one of those unique partnerships where we are very lucky when a composer and a librettist really find each other. There are many other famous examples of composers

finding their voice through a librettist, and I certainly think this is one of them.

What are your expectations for the work in the future?

Holten: With any new opera, the hope is always that it will receive further productions, that the production from the opening night will not be the only and defining one. And I've already heard from some people in the business that they thought that a) it's a masterpiece but b) it's so different, it really makes you sit up. At the end of the day, there are quite a few new operas being written, thankfully, but many of them are in the same kind of "region". And this one really truly is different, and makes you sit up and think: "What is this?"

I think this is a piece that would actually have a chance to travel far, but it does need, even in further presentations, people who have the courage to say: "Here is something that is so against everything in our time, where everything needs to be quick, fast, entertaining and flashy" – the life of a Norwegian fisherman is hardly flashy. It needs people who have the courage to ask us to sit and listen to that. By doing that and by sitting through the whole work you do enter a state of mind which is different from everyday life, which is so different from our normal world, that it really brings us to what is important in our existence. So yes, I do think and hope that *Morgen und Abend* will have a further life.

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