

FIRST PERFORMANCES

Georg Friedrich Haas *Morgen und Abend*, Royal Opera House, London

Morgen und Abend is Georg Friedrich Haas's seventh opera, a co-commission by the Royal Opera in London and Deutsche Opera in Berlin. It is an hour-and-a-half long, and its libretto is adapted from the novel *Morgon og Kveld* (2000) by Norwegian author Jon Fosse, whose work Haas previously adapted in *Melancholia* for the Paris Opéra. *Morgen und Abend's* two continuous scenes present the life of fisherman Johannes by focusing on its two most salient moments – Johannes's birth (in the morning) and death (in the evening). In this strategy there is a slight, if inadvertent, echo of the lights on/lights off of Haas's *In Vain*.

The birth scene comprises for the most part a spoken monologue by Johannes's father, Olai, played here by Austrian actor Klaus Maria Brandauer (star of the film *Out of Africa*). While his wife Signe gives birth, the fisherman Olai sits outside the delivery room soliloquising on the course his son's life will take. Anxiety underlies Olai's speech: 'dark and warm in Signe's belly / he grew big and healthy and pretty / ... / and now he has to / come out into the cold world / and has to be alone'. Eventually the midwife (soprano Sarah Wegener) emerges to tell Olai, in song, that he has a son. In Graham Vick's production, the few objects on the sparse set revolve all but imperceptibly around the stage throughout the opera, indicating at once the passage of time and, in a quasi-expressionistic way, the disorientation and disquiet of first Olai's and subsequently Johannes's mind.

The death scene (which lasts around an hour to the birth scene's half hour) begins immediately without transition, suggesting life's transience. Johannes (baritone Christoph Pohl) is at home and feels that something is askew; he sees an apparition of his late wife Erna (contralto Helena Rasker); he discusses his ill-feeling with his daughter, also called Signe (Sarah Wegener again); he sees an apparition of his dead friend and fellow fisherman Peter (tenor Will Hartmann), who invites him out on the waves. Eventually the penny drops for Johannes: he is

dead; with Peter he walks off into the white light of the afterlife.

By contrast with Haas's usual style, the score generally eschews the use of quarter and eighth tones, apparently to avoid wasting precious rehearsal time on tuning issues (microtones feature once in a vocal passage and a handful of times elsewhere). Consistent with that style, though, are chords throughout modelled on the harmonic spectrum (their timbre varied through shifting instrumentation), such as in the opening scene, and abundant string glissandi serving to undermine pitch stability. Curiously, the straight-ahead harmonicity of the score at times recalls John Adams.

Occasionally the score is beautiful: a range of percussion instruments create unusual sonorities, and Haas has a sensitive feel for the voice. However, there is a more-or-less continuous disconnect between the orchestra and the voices: for much of the opera the orchestral discourse occurs without any reference whatsoever to the phrasing of the concurrent vocal parts. This, along with Haas's continuous orchestral texture and the general eschewing of silence and caesura, calls to mind the approach of a Hollywood soundtrack – *Lord of the Rings*, say – wherein the music is constant behind the action and dialogue. This approach is particularly problematic in the (over-long) opening monologue, during which Olai's words are rendered at times inaudible due to the loudness of the continuous, seemingly unrelated orchestral texture.

The language of *Morgen und Abend's* libretto is pointedly bare. Here is a typical passage:

Peter: Should we go out onto the water / and fish together / the way we have so many times / we were fishermen for our whole lives / you Johannes / and me.

Johannes: Yes / yes we were.

Peter: We were fishermen.

Johannes: I am a fisherman / I was a fisherman my whole life.

Whilst presumably the intended effect is Pinter-esque, instead the libretto feels like it was written in about half an hour.

Morgen und Abend's main issue is Fosse's dramaturgy. Fosse has spoken in the past of a wish that his drama should have a sacral air. In *Morgen und Abend* that portentousness is apparent from the opening, in which thundering bass drums alternate with the intoning of an off-stage choir. The problem is that, while *Morgen und Abend* takes itself seriously, it has nothing to say; and profundity without depth amounts to shallow mysticism. There's a well-known writing tip by Chekhov: 'Don't tell me the moon is shining; show me the glint of light on broken glass'. Show, don't tell. Now, in this day and age, one may well feel empowered to veto such injunctions towards specificity, naturalism and verisimilitude; but if one does, one must have something to function in their stead. *Morgen und Abend* settles in this respect on allegory – morning as birth, evening as death, a (two-dimensional) everyman fisherman protagonist, some obvious Christian overtones in the characters of fishermen Johannes and Peter, and so on. If one is looking for some forgettable entertainment – the musical equivalent of a formulaic Hollywood drama – fine, but if the opera has higher aspirations such mock-profundity feels unimaginative and even slightly tasteless.

When watching *Morgen und Abend* I couldn't help but contrast its dramatic conservatism with the progressiveness of *Einstein on the Beach*, a comparison partly due to Vick's production, its blindingly white stage strewn with odd objects (a boat, a shopping trolley, a door frame) having obvious resonances with some of Bob Wilson's. In *Einstein on the Beach*, profundity and meaning are rejected – and joyously rejected at that – in favour of the sensory play of movement and surface. Through its attention to surfaces, and through its daring but thrilling doing-away in one fell swoop with the generic appurtenances of opera (character, plot, aria and so on), *Einstein on the Beach* refreshes the genre, reimagining opera as musical spectacle. Allegory such as that in *Morgen und Abend* can't help but ring false by comparison. As Nietzsche writes, 'Mystical explanations are regarded as profound; the truth is that they are not even superficial'. Opera does not have to be 'serious' to be taken seriously.

Liam Cagney

Steven Takasugi *Sideshow*, Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study, Harvard University

Sideshow, for amplified octet and electronics by American composer Steven Takasugi, was

given its US premiere by Talea Ensemble in Cambridge, Massachusetts, on 1 December 2015. A 2010 Guggenheim Foundation grant launched Takasugi's work on this hour-long piece, and the Bludenzener Tage zeitgemäßer Musik programmed the first performance in their November 2015 festival. The piece was eagerly anticipated, not least because an excerpt of it featured in Manchester-based Distractfold Ensemble's programme at Darmstadt in 2014, a performance that earned them the Kranichsteiner performance prize that year.

Born in Los Angeles in 1960, Takasugi is known internationally perhaps as much for his intense, metaphor-rich teaching style as for his music. His compositions are largely electronic, consisting of thousands of samples of stringed and household instruments sequenced into long, dense cascades of microtonal and hyper-frenetic attacks that are interspersed with occasional meditations on isolated sounds and their environments. *Sideshow*, based on real and imaginary stories from the freak shows and midways of early-1900s Coney Island, makes manic actors of the Talea performers, who mime playing their instruments as much as they actually play them, stare into the audience with big, toothy, 'carny' grins, and occasionally dissolve into fits of laughter or other horrifying spasms.

Sideshow differs from much of Takasugi's music in its programmatic movement and section titles, largely carnivalesque propositions of a glimpse at 'The Man Who Couldn't Stop Laughing', 'The Human Fish', or someone 'Electrocuting an Elephant'. There are 62 such titles printed in the programme, which range from the fantastic to the financial. While the titles are diverse and evocative, they sometimes rush by, and the music is made up largely of Takasugi's homogenous but dazzling densities, punctuated sparsely by overt theatrical gestures: a stomping march, the introduction of props, or a silent, painstakingly slow surveying glance around the room done by the ensemble with unnerving and impressive coordination. With the spectacle promised by the titles, this can feel disappointing at first, as though the bulk of the music is but a set of virtuosic interludes between watching the musicians do silly things they do not usually do (although Talea were convincing and utterly committed to these roles). This is not to downplay the significance of the theatrical in *Sideshow*. Most of the musicians' actual playing is difficult to distinguish from their miming. There is a disjointedness to every action: sometimes actions are radically slowed down, sometimes radically sped up;