

Chaya Czernowin: Heart Chamber (Deutsche Oper Berlin)

Opera takes on love with a score inspired by light dancing on a spiderweb.

By Clive Paget on 3 May, 2021

It's a chance encounter. Two people pass on a stairway, their hands touching as he retrieves her dropped jar of honey. Not much in itself, but it proves a potent trigger for Chaya Czernowin's new opera, *Heart Chamber: An Inquiry About Love*. Premiered to considerable acclaim in 2019 at Deutsche Oper Berlin, it's the Israeli composer's fourth major stage work and cements her reputation as one of the most intriguing music theatre voices of recent years.



Czernowin describes her process as “working with metaphor as a means of reaching a sound world which is unfamiliar; the use of noise and physical parameters as weight, textural surface (as in smoothness or roughness etc), problematization of time and unfolding and shifting of scale in order to create a vital, visceral and direct sonic experience, all this with the aim of reaching a music of the subconscious which goes beyond style conventions or rationality.” Phew...

As director Claus Guth explains on the insightful documentary film that accompanies the DVD, that means she deals almost exclusively in abstracts, imagining everything as happening in a black space (though as the composer herself remarks, there's an intense precision about her intentions). The director's job, says Guth, is to make her ideas concrete by "dumbing it down", even, perhaps, "spoiling it" in order to make matters sufficiently clear. This being their third collaboration, there's a trust that allows Guth, essentially a visual artist, to work with singer in an intensely natural style before applying lighting and video to destabilise his manufactured concrete realism. It's a process that works well, and although the busy camerawork here tends to focus our attention for us, taking away some of the widescreen impact built into the live experience, the end result makes for involving theatre.

The plot explores a slowly evolving love affair between Patrizia Ciofi (usually a bel canto coloratura, here an impressively trusting initiate into the world of contemporary opera) and baritone Dietrich Henschel, whose character as an architect as reflected in Christian Schmidt's structural, revolving set. As the protagonists explore their developing relationship, their subconscious thoughts are expressed by mezzo-soprano Noa Frenkel and countertenor Terry Wey. It's almost certainly no accident that while the real-life soprano and baritone are vocally poles apart, their inner selves are very much on a timbral par.

While elements of the plot are traumatic and often oblique – her past, perhaps, involves a husband and child; he is somehow ashamed of having been weak before – the end point is both clear and uplifting. Uli Aumüller's evocative video design gives a sense of bodies dwarfed by the outside world, while inner lives are confined to rooms and the endless rerunning of moments traveling up and down a concrete staircase (all likely metaphors).

Although words are simple, almost stark, emotions are complex and embedded deeply inside an intricate score that can be pared back to the filigree chamber forces of Ensemble Nikel or beefed up to deploy the full force of the Orchestra of the Deutsche Oper Berlin. To that, the composer adds an layer of electronics, often derived from found sound (rustling leaves etc.) and skilfully realised by the experienced team at Freiburg-based SWR Experimentalstudio.

The music's full arsenal – breaths, electronics, electric guitar, piano, saxophone, the rasp of a brass choir – is wonderfully summoned forth by conductor Johannes Kalitzke who ensures that, while much of the score is delicate (though amplified), nothing ever feels small. A solo double bass jolts the score into life with a massive pizzicato heartbeat before broadening into 12 minutes of glissandi and tremolos that creak and groan like a living organ in turmoil.

At the heart of the opera is an intense one-on-one conversation between two people face to face on a bare stage. Will you open up my life? Will you never leave? Will you protect me? Will you let me be free? A kiss opens up further lines of inquiry. Will you be like a father, but a good father? Will you be like a mother, but don't die?

The high-pitched sounds accompanying the crucial climax – explained in the documentary film as the processed sound of an electric guitar in its very highest register designed to replicate the visual image of a light shining on a spider web as it moves in the breeze – echo in the silence of the would-be lovers' mutual isolation. Czernowin sees these sounds as a reflection of something discovered that was always there but never realised. That could almost stand as a metaphor for *Heart Chamber* itself, a newly exposed musical world that's well worth investigating.

Composer: Chaya Czernowin

Work: Heart Chamber

Performer: Deutsche Oper Berlin/Johannes Kalitske

Label: 2110673 (DVD) NBD0120V (Blu-ray)