

Opera Britannia

Bluebeard's Castle: Maggio Musicale Fiorentino, 5th June 2012

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The Maggio Musicale Fiorentino confirms its strong and time-honoured ties with Béla Bartók with a diptych consisting of one of the two ballets the Hungarian composer wrote, *The Miraculous Mandarin* (*A csodálatos mandarin,*) and his only opera, *Bluebeard's Castle* (*A kékszakállú herceg vára*), which had its Italian premiere in Florence in 1938. This final offering of the 75th Maggio is a co-production with the Saito Kinen Festival of Japan. The mise-en-scène and choreography are entrusted to **Jo Kanamori**, a Japanese dancer, choreographer and producer with a strong European formation. In both ballet and opera Kanamori takes inspiration from *Butoh*, the type of dance born in Japan after the nuclear catastrophe of War World Two, an art form that expresses a diverse range of activities, techniques and motivations for dance, performance or movement, often performed with slow hyper-controlled motion and typically involving grotesque situations and imagery as well as controversial, taboo subjects.

Kanamori and his team (sets designers **Tsuyoshi Tane**, **Lina Ghotmeth** and **Dan Dorell**, and costume designer **Yuichi Nakashima**) were decidedly more convincing in the ballet, where they created a threatening, dark, decayed neighborhood, engulfed in a large cave and inhabited by faceless people. The only way out is a round hole that at the end, after the Mandarin's death, becomes a blinding white moon, perhaps a symbol of hope.

The technique of the *Bunraku* theatre, where large puppets are moved by puppeteers in full view of the audience, influenced both works, particularly the ballet where the dancer impersonating the Mandarin was “manoeuvred” by a masked alter ego completely clothed in black: the two seemed basically glued one to the other.

Kanamori tried to create a similar disturbing atmosphere for the opera, without entirely succeeding: the walls of the castle, which in the libretto are described almost as creatures with a life of their own, are aptly translucent; the black faceless figures (seven in number, just like the doors of the castle) make another appearance as the servants of the Duke. However, the mysterious game of lights and shadows, the Japanese theatrical devices that made the ballet truly and spontaneously captivating, fell almost flat in the opera, where the tension building was largely left to the devices of the two protagonists and the orchestra.



Conductor **Zsolt Hamar**'s approach to the opera reminded me of István Kertész, one of the most authoritative interpreters of the Bartók masterpiece, who once put forward the attractive hypothesis that Bluebeard is Bartók himself, and figuratively the symbol of all those individuals that does not wish others to penetrate the secret of their own being. Thus, the openings of the doors become Bluebeard's intimate history: the bitter harshness of his adolescence, the terrible rough war of his youth; the success he achieved; his being a poet, reflected in the garden into which he has transformed his belongings; and finally, his power, which includes and sums up all the rest. The price he paid for all this – hidden behind the sixth door with an extreme sense of shame – are the tears he shed, so copious as to form a large lake. Beyond the last door, there are – still alive in his memory – the three women of his life, three women met in three separate stages of his existence marked by as many disappointments. The entire story is therefore seen as the relationship of a couple: love that along the way wears away, does not transform itself into a true comprehension but remains a conflict, placated only by memories.

Hamar gave us a rendition of strong lyrical imprint, which, far from highlighting gloomy shadows or exasperating the timbric and harmonic contrasts, exalted the transparency of the orchestral writing, unfolded the majestic burst of some melodies (the opening of the fifth door, for example) into abandonments of intense but restrained cantabiles. It is a veritable love story the one that Hamar tells: the subterranean sighs of the clarinets that give start to the opening of the doors is full of anguish but also strangely sweet and melancholic; the two

violin solos of the third door achingly counterpoint Judit's ecstatic singing; the garden blooming at the opening of the fourth door has an enamelled shininess; the arioso with which Bluebeard narrates how he met the women of his life colours itself of a melancholic tenderness, an affectionate regret for what is no longer and what could have been.



The superb conducting was matched by superb singing, particularly from the male protagonist. **Matthias Goerne**, one of supreme Lied interpreters of our time, is one of those singers that, even if they wished to do so, would not be able to conceal the intense communicativeness characteristic of an overwhelming humanity: his warm and naturally expressive timbre expanded itself either in the ample phrases of the fifth door and in the subtly anguished trepidation permeating the quick interventions of the third one; and the desperate disappointment emerging from the conclusive phrases is imbued with heart-piercing emotions, conveying the endless loneliness that is the key word to understand this ambiguous part. The role, written for a bass, lies in a few places slightly low for the German baritone, who on the other hand had ample opportunities to show the warm richness of his middle register and the security of his top.

Bluebeard's Castle is after all a very long duet, ultimately successful only if both protagonists are on the same level. The considerable gamble the Maggio took by casting as Judit a young singer in the beginning phase of her career paid off handsomely. The Greek-American mezzo-soprano **Daveda Karanas**, making her European debut, managed not only not to look out of place opposite such an experienced artist as Goerne, but held her own, with a most passionate interpretation and a bright, almost piercing instrument that reflected the heroine's youthful impulsiveness. The high C of the fifth door, a nightmare for so many mezzo-sopranos tackling this hybrid role, was splendidly nailed.

Last but not least, it is mandatory to highlight the state of grace of the Orchestra of the Maggio Musicale Fiorentino, perfectly at ease with this arduous repertoire.

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