

“Laser-sharp rhythms”

Pablo Heras-Casado



Gerard Mortier started off his tenure as director at Madrid's Teatro Real in October 2010 with Kurt Weill's opera *The Rise and Fall of the City of Mahoganny* (text: Bertolt Brecht). The work attracted great attention – not only because of the oppressively topical staging by La Fura dels Baus, but also because of the unanimously critically acclaimed conductorship of Pablo Heras-Casado.

First of all: The Rise and Fall of the City of Mahagonny is an opera with all the right ingredients.

Pablo Heras-Casado: It was the first time I had conducted a piece by Kurt Weill and I realised that his style of writing is really demanding for the singers. You need big voices and almost Wagnerian qualities in every singer. In this sense, we were very happy to have a cast that had this dramatic strength. Another remarkable aspect was the scenic and musical presence of the choir. And the dramatic role of the orchestra, which is psychologically very complex, was outstanding. All this made it very challenging to find the right balance between all the styles that Weill uses.

Weill's music is very accessible. At the same time, it also plays with the genre ...

Pablo Heras-Casado: The dramatic scenes in Mahagonny refer to some key works in the history of opera, such as those by Verdi, Janáček, Monteverdi or Mozart. Verdi achieves great effects with very simple things. The use of lighter moments is also very well calculated in Mahoganny – for example, how to approach the Alabama Song. The key is not only to focus on the joyful character, but also to work on the bitterness of the music by offering the right space, tempo and colour.

It seemed you were not afraid to conduct this music with as much power and sharpness as possible.

Pablo Heras-Casado: Absolutely. This music needs a constant renewal of energy. In almost every big scene, you have an ostinato rhythm. Before Jimmy Mahoney is condemned, for example, it is very difficult to keep up the rhythms for a long period. It is really demanding. But if you can sustain this energy, the result is really stunning.

At the same time, you also showed the melancholic side of Mahagonny.

Pablo Heras-Casado: It is simply part of the opera. This music always wants to show a different perspective from the seemingly pleasant reality. Wherever there is a melody that is very easy to listen to, there are “wrong” notes in the harmony or the bass line is misplaced, provoking tension. It is never just nice, there is always some bitterness. The music speaks for itself.

What was the biggest challenge in performing Mahagonny?

Pablo Heras-Casado: There were many – even just the coordination. If you lose the shape and the angle, everything fails and becomes a shapeless movement. Sometimes you need to have a laser-sharp rhythm. Another challenge is to make the orchestra produce a variety of styles. Sometimes they even have to play roughly.

The day before the première, there was a general strike in Madrid. Mahagonny ends with a strike. How did you experience this?

Pablo Heras-Casado: After more than a month of rehearsing, that was really remarkable. It was as though a journalist had written the libretto the day before the première. The social atmosphere in Spain was very turbulent at the time – and still is. The workers in the theatre discussed going out on the streets too and demonstrating. We were very aware of the situation and everybody on stage felt that the situation was part of his own life. Every single word of the libretto is relevant to our times. The problems are still the same. Our society is ruled by money. The more you have, the more you want. The less you have, the less you are.

Could the desert in Mahagonny be a metaphor for our emotional desert?

Pablo Heras-Casado: I think so. Mahagonny is a piece about our values.

When God appears, there is no redemption □

Pablo Heras-Casado: I think that is a very modern approach. Religion has been used to tell people that there is always someone to save you: a last hope. And I think perhaps it is difficult to speak about it: this is also wrong. First of all, you need your human and intimate values to be built not only on an intellectual education, but on human relations. It is a real coup de théâtre that even God cannot save you. You are alone. There is no hope in money or God.

Interview: Wolfgang Schaufler

PABLO HERAS-CASADO

Born in Granada in 1977, Pablo Heras-Casado belongs to the most proficient conductors of his generation. His repertoire is very varied, from baroque to contemporary music. Heras-Casado has conducted among others the

Los Angeles Philharmonic Orchestra and the Dresden Staatskapelle. His debut with the Berlin Philharmonic is planned for October 2011.



VIDEO

See the video version of the interview at www.universaledition.com/heras-casado-interview