

The Epic of Gilgamesh

Bohuslav Martinů: The Epic of Gilgamesh for soli, mixed choir and orchestra

Oratorio in three parts for soli, mixed choir and orchestra according to the critical edition | 50'

Libretto by Bohuslav Martinů after Reginald Campbell

Edited by Aleš Březina

2 0 2 0 - 0 3 2 0 - timp, perc(4), hp, pno, str

World première: 23.01.1958, Basel; Basler Kammerorchester, cond. Paul Sacher

World première of the critical edition: 11.12.2014, Národní divadlo, Brno; Brno Philharmonic Orchestra, cond. Aleksandar Marković

The *Epic of Gilgamesh* is a large Assyrian-Babylonian poem written in cuneiform script on clay tablets probably dating back to the 7th century BC or even to earlier times.

Despite our enormous progress due to technology and industrialisation I thought that the questions and feelings which preoccupy people are still the same. We find these topics in the literature of ancient peoples which has survived as well as in our own. They revolve around friendship, love and death. The *Epic of Gilgamesh* expresses intensely and with almost painful anxiety the wish to find answers to these questions, answers we have still not found.

My composition deals with the following events: Gilgamesh, the great king of Uruk, is dreaded and worshipped like a god. He becomes the friend of a strange man named Enkidu who is the original man in his natural state. For a long time he has lived ignorantly and carelessly. The animals he defended were his friends. To win the faith of this dangerous opponent Gilgamesh sends a woman to him, a dancer from the temple of Istar, who seduces him. Having lost his innocence, the animals fear Enkidu and flee as soon as he approaches. He follows the woman to the town where you eat bread and drink

wine, where you go dancing and partying. His way of life changes immediately but he understands that he has to work to make his living. He becomes pale. There comes a moment when he remembers his youth with regret. He fights against Gilgamesh but finally they become comrades in arms. The heroes become close friends.

One day Enkidu falls ill. Gilgamesh observes him – for one day, two days, eleven days; then he does not move, he is dead. The question of death, previously unknown to Gilgamesh, arises. He does not understand that Enkidu is gone for ever, "that it was the earth who took him away". He starts to worry about himself and his life. He implores the gods to give him back his friend. But the gods stay silent, he does not get a reply. Gilgamesh begins to search for immortality but he now knows: "Only gods live for ever, the days of human beings are numbered. Therefore you should always enjoy yourself, day and night, be happy and content, night and day".

He utters passionate pleas, he implores the gods to allow him to meet his friend Enkidu again, if only for a moment. By the power of his entreaty the earth opens and Enkidu's ghost appears like smoke. Gilgamesh asks him anxiously what he has seen in this other, unknown world. The epos ends with this dramatic and extremely gloomy monologue.