

## COMPANY FOCUS

# National Moravian-Silesian Theatre, Ostrava

Reviews by Mirka Zemanová • Photography by Martin Popelář

**T**he Czech composer Jaroslav Křička (1882-1969) excelled at miniatures: he was initially known for his children's song cycles, the first Czech children's opera, *Ogaři* (Lads, 1918) and children's Singspiels. In 1936, he won the bronze medal in the Olympic Games art competition for his orchestral *Horácko Suite*, Op 63.

*The Lord in White* is Křička's third opera, completed when he was 47 and his first real attempt at a large-scale work for the stage. As he wrote in his journal in 1927, this opera 'should answer the question whether my mission is [composing] small forms'. Its full title in Czech is *Bílý pán, aneb Těžko se dnes duchům straší* – 'The Lord in White or No Haunts Left For Ghosts' – a version of Oscar Wilde's humorous short story *The Ghost of Canterville* (1887). The libretto was written by the well known lawyer and publicist Jan Löwenbach (under his pen name J L Budín). His main change was to transpose the story to the 1920s Czechoslovakia, and though the result is entertaining, it gives a different slant from Wilde's original that compares the lifestyle and manners of Americans and Brits, both native English speakers but very different from one another. Moreover, Löwenbach's text, sometimes rhymed, is not of the highest quality.

The well known Czech stage director Ondřej Havelka has a lifelong interest in the 1920s and 1930s, and the production had a good deal of period charm (as had the costumes by Jana Zbořilová). Havelka's movement direction was inventive, although the gestures were occasionally a little contrived. In the 1930s version that Max Brod prepared for performance in Germany, he replaced the

black servant Bob – a positive character – with an American cowboy; the present production returned to the original 1929 version. Havelka's directorial decision was problematic, however: the role was performed by a white singer, blacked up.

With many impulses which led to its composition, we can hear in *The Lord in White* echoes not only of Stravinsky (whom Křička met) and Gershwin, but also of Janáček (whose works he had conducted), as well as similarities with Martinů (whom he also knew) and French music; there is even an echo of Russian-style pathos. The work's collage of styles includes elements of opera, operetta and folk song, as well as jazz, contemporary dance music and revue. Interestingly, Křička employed jazz in his stage works several years before Gershwin completed *Porgy and Bess*: during his visit to Paris in 1925 Křička heard Paul Whiteman's famous orchestra, which made a strong impact on him. Křička's particular invention was rhythmic transitions between prose and singing. In the latter part of the opera, whose overall style is very different, we hear echoes of Puccini.

The vocal parts are difficult, and the cast in Ostrava was generally accomplished, in particular the Slovak soprano Soňa Godarská (Elinor), the Slovak tenor Juraj Nociar (Count Jiří), as well as the Czech baritone Tadeáš Hoza (the Spirit of Count Kazimír). The Czech mezzo Dominika Škrabalová, a gifted comedienne, almost stole the show as 'Kastelánka' (the Castle Guardian).

*The Lord in White* enjoyed considerable success in the 1930s. After the 1929 Brno premiere, eight productions throughout Europe quickly followed; the Neues Deutsches Theatre production in Prague was conducted by Georg Szell. In Vienna, the work was performed on New Year's

Eve 1932, instead of the traditional *Die Fledermaus*. This elicited protests by the Nazis who, as Křička recalled, 'disliked some of the non-Aryan names on the poster, and criticised the directorship for spending so much on a Czech novelty. They protested in parliament, and the opera was removed from the repertoire.' There were no further performances after 1937.

The situation did not improve after the war, nor after the Communist putsch in Czechoslovakia in 1948. Křička was a prolific composer and successful in his native country, and the scope of his work is extremely wide. However, the political situation after 1948 did not allow close contacts with the West, nor were Křička's operas performed there. His initial promise as an operatic composer had therefore not been fulfilled.

Ninety years after the premiere of the revised version of *The Lord in White*, it seemed right to present the opera again. The intervening years cannot hide some shortcomings of this child of its time, but they have not diminished the quality of much of its music.

It was good to see the audience at the Antonín Dvořák Theatre in Ostrava thoroughly enjoying itself, and well translated English surtitles are provided for visitors from abroad. The theatre's long-standing director Jiří Nekvasil's endeavour to present lesser-known works as often as possible has clearly paid off.

Hans Krása's two-act *Verlobung im Traum* ('Betrothal in a Dream') is his first and only full-scale opera, completed in 1930 when he was just 31. This is an assured, accomplished score by a very talented composer. The opera was premiered at the



The cast of *The Lord in White*, l-r: Markéta Cukrová (Cedrik), Martin Gurbal (Mr Hollywood), Jana Hrochová (Mrs Hollywood), Monika Jägerová (the Chatelaine), Juraj Nociar (Jiří, the Count of Satalice), Soňa Godarská (Elinor)

Neues Deutsches Theater in Prague in 1933 and was awarded the Czechoslovak State Prize later that year.

Krása (1899-1944) enjoyed success in his lifetime: his works were performed in Prague, Paris, Boston and Zurich, under well-known conductors such as Georg Szell and Sergei Koussevitzky, and received critical and public acclaim. Today he is best known for his second stage work, the one-act children's opera *Brundibár* (1938). By September 1944 it was performed 55 times during his internment in Terezín, a concentration camp near Prague, and there have been many modern productions.

*Verlobung im Traum* is based on Dostoyevsky's part tragic, part comic novella *Uncle's Dream* (1859). An aging, enfeebled Count arrives into the town of Mordasov, and is soon tricked by Maria Alexandrovna Moskaleva,

the doyenne of local society, into proposing to her 23-year-old daughter Zina. However, she loves the poor and ill revolutionary Fedya. Zina's ardent suitor Paul eventually tricks the Count into believing that the betrothal was nothing but a dream. Fedya dies, and Zina ends up living far away, married to an old government official. Dostoyevsky deftly satirises small-town manners and morals in a mock-heroic tone. The opera's libretto, written by Rudolf



Happy haunting:  
Jiří Hájek as  
The Ghost of the  
Count Kasimír



Anita Jirovská (Barbara) & Veronika Rovná (Zina) in *Betrothal in a Dream*



Fuchs and Rudolf Thomas, eliminated some specifically Russian elements but provided a solid background for setting the text to music.

The opera deserves wider recognition: since the long-missing orchestral score was discovered in the cellar of the Universal Edition in Vienna by the Israeli conductor Israel Yinon (1956-2015), this is only the fourth production since 1933 (following a co-production in Prague and Mannheim in 1994, then in Washington in 1996 and Karlsruhe in 2014).

Krása sometimes reduces instrumentation to a mere handful of colours, and employs interesting instrumental combinations; his use of wide gaps between the instruments' bottom and top registers is reminiscent of some of Janáček's scores (and Krása also played with natural speech sequences, as did Janáček). A strong melodic quality is always evident, but there are also unusual dissonances; rhythmic, percussive staccato chords in the wind instruments and plaintive solo violin passages all attract attention, and the composer shows a remarkable skill at handling vocal ensembles. The music adroitly expresses the twists and turns of the story: Krása's colourful collage grips us by swift changes, a vivid sense of the

grotesque, and his sheer inventiveness. Individual roles are characterised by alternating buffo and psychological components, and by employing mixtures of disparate stylistic elements – for example, of Bellini: when Zina is meant to charm the doddering Count, Krása has her sing 'Casta Diva'. There are echoes of Krása's teacher Zemlinsky, as well as of Schoenberg, Stravinsky and French music (while studying with Albert Roussel in Paris, Krása met Darius Milhaud). Yet his idiom is always personal, and the overall style original.

The vocal writing in *Verlobung* is fiendish, and among the singers Miroslava Časarová (Zina), György Hanczár (the clownish Pavel) and Pavol Kubáň (the Count) gave notable performances, as did the chorus (trained by chorusmaster Jurij Galatenko). However, the tempi in the orchestra were not always scrupulously observed, nor was the singers' German pronunciation faultless.

The director Jiří Nekvasil and the stage designer Daniel Dvořák were effective in their use of collage and elements of Expressionism. The simple sets featured a reproduction of Emil Filla's atmospheric painting, *A Reader of Dostoyevsky* (1907) – a fitting touch. Filla was a Czech from Moravia who survived the Nazi camps

*Top: Pavol Kubáň (Prince) and Lucie Hilscherová (Maria Alexandrovna)*

*Above: Miroslava Časarová (Zina) and the ballet of the National Moravian Silesian Theatre*

and painted this iconic work of Czech Expressionism under the influence of Edvard Munch; it portrays the reader of Dostoyevsky's novel as a collapsed, exhausted figure.

The production is the first part of the 'Operas by the Terezín Composers' cycle, co-produced with the National Theatre Prague (where it will be performed in November this year) within the framework of its 'Musica non grata' project. This project, which has received a generous support from the German Embassy in Prague, focuses on so-called 'unwelcome music' by Czech and German artists, particularly of those of Jewish origin, who were silenced by the Nazi regime.

The cycle will continue in 2023 with two operas by Viktor Ullmann. As the theatre's director Jiří Nekvasil emphasised, it represents at least a partial repayment of the debt we owe these remarkable composers. Their deaths at the hands of the Nazi regime, in the prime of their life, represent a huge loss for Czech music, and it is gratifying to see their work increasingly paid the attention it fully deserves. **ON**