

Beyond the Pale

‘What does music do?’ The question gets asked about all the arts – but about music most. Given the terrible things that happen in the world, the arts seem so ineffective. But that is not the whole story. The arts make us question things – including what they seem to assert. By contrast, tyrants never doubt. Bullies are addicts: and their henchmen are terrified.

Such things, I must confess, are always in my mind. But they came to the fore on a trip to the opera at Covent Garden. Bartók’s *Bluebeard’s Castle* and Schoenberg’s *Erwartung* have long been favourites of mine.

Bluebeard’s Castle was a formative influence. The artistic source for ‘Bluebeard’ is a fairy story by Perrault in which a man marries wives only to murder them after the wedding. The historical ‘Bluebeard’ fought alongside Joan of Arc. Gilles de Rais seemed real Victoria Cross material. Peacetime revealed him to be a child molesting serial killer. (Don’t get me wrong: I do *not* believe that soldiers are violence junkies.)

Bartók – and Bálázs who wrote his text – have risen above all this. The whole thing moves onto a symbolic plane. (All symbols get richer with use.) Someone has said the opera is about the struggle for a free independent Hungary. No doubt it can be. But I always come back to the first interpretation I heard. That even in a marriage either partner must respect the privacy of parts of the other’s life.

William Blake got this into a short poem he left in a notebook draft:

Never seek to tell thy love
Love that never told can be
For the gentle wind does move
Silently invisibly

I told my love, I told my love,
I told her all my heart,
Trembling, cold, in ghastly fears
Ah she doth depart

Soon as she was gone from me
A traveller came by.
Silently invisibly
He took her with a sigh
O was no deny

Judith, his bride, finds herself alone with Bluebeard in his castle. Some ancestral home! It is dark and the walls are damp. Judith wants to illumine their married life: let us open the doors! A torture chamber, armoury, garden and – supremely – a kingdom are revealed. The light gets stronger and stronger. But blood is a presence – depicted musically by intrusive, clashing minor seconds – everywhere. The blood is the cost of Bluebeard’s effort and achievement. It suggests something sinister to Judith. (Marriage nerves are a reality now – but in the 19th-century your husband was frighteningly all-powerful. And while a man will talk of the fruits of his labour, does

he hold forth on the blood and sweat it costs him when he is courting?) Judith is terrified that her husband is a fairytale – wife-killing – Bluebeard. Two doors remain: they reveal Bluebeard’s tears...and his exes. They are living – living! – in his memory. Awestruck, Judith joins them. The light has dimmed with the opening of the last two doors. Bluebeard is left alone, grieving: “Darkness, darkness always...”

No opera cuts so deep. It asks us to realise and respect the utterly unknowable in everyone. The other partner may be symbolic, but Bluebeard and Judith are real individuals. *In short it tells us to give our partners their space.* But while the opera shows us that fear is inevitable, it makes it clear that fear is anti-life. *Bluebeard’s Castle* wrings my heart. But it is nothing new for art to be disturbing as well as a source of pleasure. Bach and Beethoven harrow us, Mozart terrifies us... What matters is that art should put us in touch with the quick of life.

The taboo has always been the province of the arts. The most famous speech in Shakespeare contemplates suicide: not a polite subject. The 19th-century had gone in for so much repression that we are still sorting it out. But an explosion was inevitable – and thank God it came. Ibsen, Freud and – in music – Schoenberg and Stravinsky have been much abused: and wrongly so.

The set at Covent Garden looked like a collapsed chandelier for *Bluebeard’s Castle*: the ball was definitely over. For Schoenberg’s *Erwartung* the same set suggested a deserted cemetery. *Arguably* projected backgrounds would have been a good idea for both works – what was behind Bluebeard’s doors – but equally could be a disaster.

So what is Schoenberg’s opera about? Schoenberg himself thought it half-an-hour’s music worked up out of a moment’s anxiety dream. But poets utter truths deeper than they know: and Schoenberg is no exception. His opera seems a nightmare vision in which a woman searches a wood to find her lover. Angry and terrified he has abandoned her for another woman, she fears she has killed him. Again, what is symbolic and what is real? The libretto, a co-operation between Marie Pappenheim and Schoenberg himself, gives us a woman sounding like a helpless psychiatric case: Wagner’s Isolde after a nervous breakdown as one wag put it. But a musician subscribing to this general view points to the rich, unconventional beauty of the music.

So morbidity clung to the work’s ‘image’ until all too recently. It was best heard in the accounts of Anja Silja. Then Phyllis Bryn-Julson did *Erwartung* with Rattle. For a Schoenberg ‘fan’ it was one of life’s great moments. The taboo had suddenly become an exercise in self-knowledge and self-acceptance – an enriching of our daylight selves that made the potential Mr or Ms Hyde less dangerous. There was no reason to believe the woman *had* murdered her lover. *She was admitting she had murderous impulses towards the man she loved.* (Many a husband cannot admit that his wife’s sterility is making him go cold on his wife. He thus makes a cruel situation more cruel.) Yes: we are all two people – and in the 19th-century this was usually a Jekyll-and-Hyde. This side of us is an uncomfortable truth. (Blake first drafted "Never *pain* to tell thy love...") This investigation of the dark side of normal human nature requires safe hands to guide us and brave, healthy men to confront the subconscious dragons. This is where artists like Blake and Schoenberg come in. Along with Freud they teach us not to be ashamed of being human, rather than

kowtowing to tyrants of decency and respectability. We get an everyday world that is more robust, less vulnerable to what threatens our peace and happiness. We become less polite and more real.

With Mozart or Beethoven a work came back to earth: it finished by landing in a key. As music roamed ever further and more often through the rainbow of keys the flightpaths grew less convincing. Mozart and Beethoven had always filled in the octave as a kind of gravitational force. In terms of the language of music Schoenberg embraces this in *Erwartung*. We get a saturation of the chromatic spectrum. It used to pass off like a 'bad dream': now it ends in a new serenity.

What our two operas are about is neither old news nor the latest. It is for all time. The novelist Tolstoy – psychologically a fairytale Bluebeard – made his fiancée miserable by forcing her to read about his debauches in his diaries. (When they were married he let himself be terrified by their happiness.) In the Covent Garden production of *Erwartung* a silent man was on set. One reviewer suggested he was a 'stalker'. No: he was a figment of her imagination. She pulled him about like a puppet or plaything. At times it got quite funny. Now I *long* to see a *Judith's Castle*.

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