

Minor Miracles

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Among Korngold's mature operas, only *Die tote Stadt* has enjoyed anything close to a widespread reappraisal; *Das Wunder der Heliane*, although subject to occasional surges of interest, remains a relative rarity. However the exceptional new production at the Deutsche Oper, directed by Christof Loy and conducted by Marc Albrecht, may have enough of a galvanising effect to turn *Heliane* into a belated popular success. Although the work itself is not without its shortcomings, the affectionate, ambassadorial grace of Mr Albrecht's musical direction, the dedication of an excellent cast and, above all, the taut intensity of Mr Loy's staging, seemed determined to show everyone in the audience just what we had been missing by neglecting this opera for so long.

Admittedly, not even the best efforts of Mr Loy could smooth over all the oddities in the libretto (adapted by Hans Müller-Einigen from a play by Hans Kaltneker), which begins as a simple allegorical fable but soon grows muddled by its own dramatic contrivances. The story, in which all characters except Heliane are identified solely by their function, takes place in an unspecified distant realm where joy and laughter have been forbidden by the King. When a stranger arrives bringing happiness to the people he is soon arrested and sentenced to death, but is offered a last-minute reprieve if he can convince the King's wife, Heliane, to love the King.

It's a promising start, but the economy of the premise soon unravels into a string of implausible, hazily motivated events that serve mostly to undercut the moral clarity of the tale: the Stranger falls in love with Heliane, the King accuses her of infidelity, the Stranger kills himself to save Heliane, an angry mob shows up looking to venerate the Stranger who brought them happiness, and the King, following the flawed logic of Medieval romances, decrees that if Heliane is indeed pure then God will give her the ability to resurrect the dead Stranger ... otherwise, she will be burned at the stake. There follows the titular



Loy: *Das Wunder der Heliane* © Monika Rittershaus, 2018

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Deutsche Oper Berlin. Korngold: *Das Wunder der Heliane*. Christof Loy, director. Sara Jakubiak (*Heliane*), Josef Wagner (*The Ruler*). Brian Jagde (*The Stranger*), Okka von der Damerau (*The Messenger*), Derek Welton (*The Gatekeeper*), Burkhard Ulrich (*The Blind Judge*), Gideon Poppe (*The Young Man*), Andrew Dickinson, Dean Murphy, Thomas Florio, Clemens Bieber, Philipp Jekal, Stephen Bronk (*Six Judges*), and Sandra Hamaoui and Meechot Marrero (*Two Angelic Voices*). Chorus and Orchestra of the Deutsche Oper Berlin. Marc Albrecht, conductor

miracle, and a kind of post-Wagnerian consummation of love in death, but the various pieces quite never come together into a satisfying whole. Even with Korngold's overdriven opulence doing its best to connect the story's emotional dots, one is still not entirely convinced that the moral schema of the work would stand up to any kind of close scrutiny.

None of this, however, seems to have deterred Christof Loy, who approached the action with total conviction and an almost refreshing lack of irony. He managed to find a physical setting that grounded in the opera in a recognisably modern world without sacrificing the distance from reality necessary for a good fable. The magnificent set, by Johannes Leiacker, could have been one of the myriad antechambers in Kafka's law-courts, a rigorously elegant, sparingly furnished and seemingly functionless space that grew threatening through the sheer immutability of its dark wood panelling and its stultifying air of respectability. Even the hands on the clock, built directly into the wall in early twentieth-century style, remained immobile. During the course of the opera's three acts, the space served as both prison and courtroom; only subtle changes of light – and a few effectively unsubtle ones – allowed it any gradations of mood.



Korngold: Das Wunder der Heliane. Christof Loy, director. Marc Albrecht, conductor. Berlin, Deutsche Oper, March 2018. © Monika Rittershaus, 2018.

Mr Loy did not try to alter the nature of the events nor even make them more credible, and there were a few moments where the earnest tone of his staging seemed to highlight the story's more ridiculous plot-points. But Mr Loy was so persistent in his vision that one found oneself going along with it all. The ultimate coherence of his staging came largely from the nuance he was able to find within the principal characters. The King, especially, emerged as strangely sympathetic, and his crusade against human happiness seemed less a *raison d'être* than the terminal stage in a long process of disillusion; by the end he had become a tragic figure, whose actions

were born more of desperation than innate evil. The Stranger too seemed less categorically good in his intentions and at moments he was surrounded by the vague air of a false prophet.

It was Heliane herself who stood at the centre of the story's mysteries, but who also ended up being the most compellingly human figure on the stage. Her actions, always heartfelt if never quite governed by an obvious logic, managed to deflect the judgments that were heaped upon her for much of the opera, and Sara Jakubiak's carefully rendered performance, neither wanton nor saintly, conveyed a nobility of spirit that remained unshaken even in the face of increasingly unreasonable demands. Ms Jakubiak's firmly sculpted lines and tenderness of tone were, in every way, the high point of the first act, and remained one of the production's greatest assets throughout the evening. She was convincingly ecstatic in her scenes with the stranger, and unquestionably forceful in her dealings with the King, but in an opera where so much of the action tended toward

extremes of feeling, her performance was all the more refreshing for spending so much of its time exploring the spectrum of emotional ambiguities that lay in between.

Josef Wagner gave a deeply anguished, fearsomely energetic performance as the King. In moving suddenly and convincingly from rage to clemency, from complete authority to crippling uncertainty, he revealed a tormented, irresolute ruler overwhelmed by his own power. Yet his ability to elicit sympathy even at his most imperious transformed the trial preparations at the beginning of the second act into one of the evening's most dramatically engaging scenes. The Stranger, while not quite as prone to polar extremes, was forced to alternate between confidence, fear and rapture, often in quick succession, and Brian Jagde managed to give compelling voice to each of these modes without compromising the fundamental mystery at the heart of the character. He was at his most arresting in those sections that demanded greatest boldness of expression – of which Korngold provided plenty – but his appealing, slightly dark tone and ease in the lower-lying passages made for a performance with no obvious weaknesses.



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The smaller roles, too, received excellent performances. Okka von der Damerau didn't have many lines as the Messenger, but she was nonetheless able to establish herself as an essential presence, mocking the King and stirring public opinion against Heliane but, in the end, genuinely humbled in the face of the miraculous. As the gatekeeper, Derek Welton distinguished himself in the first act and again in the third with passages of great richness and fluidity; and Burkhard Ulrich, as the blind judge, caught exactly the right balance between authority and frailty. The choir, who appeared in full force at the climax of the second act and who brought a note of reverence to the 'miracle' of the third act, were superb throughout.

Just as Mr Loy was able to locate unexpected depths in the story, conductor Marc Albrecht did an extraordinary job finding the balance in a score that contains nuggets of magnificence but can seem overwhelming in anything other than small doses. *Heliane* begins in high gear – its opening bars could easily be the extracted climax of a much longer choral work – and continues to move from cymbal crash to harp flourish to brass crescendo with few moments of respite. Instead of trying to moderate the excesses, Mr Albrecht leaned gently into them, forcing us to accept the score on its own overwrought terms. The approach might have gone disastrously wrong had Mr Albrecht's enthusiasm not proved to be such a reliable guide. Korngold's unyielding arsenal of sonic effects could still be wearying, but Mr Albrecht seemed to know where to find the beauty among the gloss: the first appearance of Heliane was remarkable not despite the fluttering woodwinds and saccharine violins but precisely because of them; the overheated finale still managed to

offer a credible and moving evocation of the lovers' ecstasy; and the intermezzo between the second and third acts was exquisite by any measure. The orchestra, similarly inspired, played with inexhaustible fervour throughout the evening.

Korngold's later successes in Hollywood – a decade after the première of *Heliane* he won an Academy Award for *The Adventures of Robin Hood* (1938) – eventually came to overshadow the earlier works on which he had made his reputation as a 'serious' composer. Certainly *Das Wunder der Heliane*, with its idiosyncratic libretto and unfashionably effusive late-romanticism, is easy to dismiss, but Mr Loy and Mr Albrecht remained so convinced of its merits that their conviction began to spread. The opera may still be far short of a masterpiece, but the new production at the Deutsche Oper made it very difficult not to surrender to its pleasures.