

Fatal Obsession

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With all the attention-seeking productions that tread the boards of Berlin's opera houses in a given year, Robert Carsen's new staging of *Die tote Stadt* – which kicked off the Komische Oper's new season – was striking for its extreme respectability. Even when diving into the glittery demi-monde of the second act or inverting the opera's 'it was all a dream' plot twist into its own unsettling Twilight Zone ending, it remained scrupulously tasteful. The musical direction of Ainārs Rubiķis was equally even-handed and level-headed, turning the overheated moments of Korngold's score down to a gentle simmer without diminishing their dramatic heft. The sets were elegant, the singing was for the most part very good; there was, objectively, nothing about the production that could be described as a serious flaw.

Carsen: Die tote Stadt
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Komische Oper Berlin. Korngold:

Die tote Stadt. Robert Carsen, director. Aleš Briscein (Paul), Sara Jakubiak (Marietta), Günter Papendell (Frank, Fritz), Maria Fiselier (Brigitta), Georgina Melville (Juliette), Marta Mika (Lucienne), Adrian Strooper (Victorin), Ivan Turšič (Count Albert). Choir and Orchestra of the Komische Oper Berlin. Ainārs Rubiķis, conductor



Yet the excess of respectability seemed to weigh everything down. One kept waiting for the production to do something that would lift it out of its formal elegance into headier realms of emotional engagement, but this never quite happened. Mr Carsen waited until the final moments to show his directorial hand and, yes, it turned out he had been subverting the story all along, and yes, his take was actually quite clever. But by that point it was too late. The intellectual pleasure that came with connecting the dots and reassembling the oddities of the staging into a consistent picture of what had really happened could not outweigh the amount of real-time spent in the company of an unsympathetic protagonist, his unhealthy obsessions and his achingly demure surroundings.

Some of the problems undoubtedly lay with the work itself. The opera, adapted pseudonymously by Korngold and his father from the novel *Bruges-la-morte* tells the story of a man unable to escape the memory of his dead wife; when he meets a woman who looks exactly like her, he becomes obsessed and eventually kills her by strangling her with a lock of his dead wife's hair. Of course it turns out it was all just a feverish nightmare or, at very least, a clumsy metaphor: one can only escape the past by killing it. Or something. Yet there is not a single idea in the opera, from the distressed man talking to a picture of his dead wife, to the third act plot twist, to the relentless overstatement of the virgin/whore and real/ideal dualities, that did not seem painfully commonplace. Korngold, for his part, did

nothing to make those ideas universal or even vaguely intriguing. The music is a pleasant concoction of glistening harps and post-Straussian off-cuts that illustrate the scenes without bothering to question them; the action is obvious to the point of banality.



Korngold: Die tote Stadt. Robert Carsen, director. Ainārs Rubiķis, conductor. Berlin, Komische Oper, October 2018. © Iko Freese, Berlin Komische Oper, 2018.

With minimal directorial intervention, the opera could be turned into a dark, fetishistic tale of male obsession and that, in the end, is what Mr Carsen's production turned out to be. But to get there, he played the first two and a half acts as straight as possible. There were only a few minor moments of divergence from the libretto to suggest that Mr Carsen was planning his own twist on the twist ending: Frank's furtive note-taking on Paul's behaviour in the opening scene was the work of a psychologist rather than a friend, and when Marietta arrived she seemed so disconnected from everything

around her we could not be sure she was real. Her generic flirtations suggested less a personality than an unimaginative attempt on Paul's part to summon an image of his ideal. There was an obvious void where their budding mutual attraction should have been.

The staging did have a number of nice visual touches that gave it some energy. The transition between the 'real' first act and the apparent hallucination of the second was marked by the walls and ceiling of Paul's elegant room breaking apart to reveal glimpses of the emptiness behind. Nearly everything in the second act was encrusted in glitter, and Marietta made a memorably confettied entrance from above. Even the religious procession in the third act, for all its thematic obviousness, was a well-executed moment of stage imagery. But Mr Carsen waited until the very final moments of the opera to drop his revealer – it seems a shame to spoil it here – which did indeed make sense of the stilted propriety of the earlier acts, but couldn't quite overcome the story's deficiency of good ideas.

Within the constraints of Mr Carsen's specific vision, Sara Jakubiak delivered an exceptional performance. Instead of creating a credible character, she presented Marietta as an enigmatic assemblage of gestures and attitudes seemingly unbound from the reality of the story: the gaiety in her initial meeting with Paul was so much at odds with the tenor of the scene as to seem jarring; her initial flirtations and later mockery seemed directed not at Paul specifically but into the gulf that existed between them. Ms Jakubiak's ability to present Marietta as nothing more the



Korngold: Die tote Stadt. Robert Carsen, director. Ainārs Rubiķis, conductor. Berlin, Komische Oper, October 2018. © Iko Freese, Berlin

distorted vision of a (possible) murderer
was the evening's most impressive feat of

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acting. Vocally she was no less impressive: she was at her most engaging and direct singing her song to Paul in the first act, and as the voice of the dead wife, but all her scenes offered a succession of spirited exclamations and balanced melodic phrases woven into a captivating whole.

In the early scenes, Aleš Briscein's Paul seemed overwhelmed by Korngold's more emphatic moments: in the higher-lying passages there was a suspicion of strain. This diminished in later scenes; vocally he seemed most comfortable in his second-act remonstrations with Marietta, although physically he maintained a tightly wound, slowly mounting state of agonised torment throughout the evening. Günter Papendell was unsurprisingly sturdy in his brief appearances as Paul's 'friend' Frank, and gave a forceful account of Fritz the Pierrot's song in the second act. As Brigitta, Maria Fiselier had reasonably little stage time, but her appearances were marked by a controlled elegance of tone and line.

Conductor Ainārs Rubiķis, who whipped the orchestra into such a percussive fury in last season's production of *The Nose*, took the opposite tack with Korngold's music, favouring understatement and restraint throughout. Anyone hoping for greater opulence might have been disappointed, but Mr. Rubiķis' approach seemed an ideal fit for both the tone of the staging and the strengths of the orchestra; there was a long-term consistency in his reading that was not easily overwhelmed by the score's sudden fits of bluster.

Man's capacity for all-consuming, sometimes fatal obsession has yielded countless novels, operas, plays and films, from the sublime (Ariosto's *Orlando furioso*, Hitchcock's *Vertigo*) to the immensely tedious. *Die tote Stadt* cannot ultimately be counted among the former. At its best it is plagued by an obviousness that has not aged well; at its worst it is disturbingly uncritical of its protagonist, content that the framework of the extended hallucination will justify his excesses. By changing the boundaries of what was hallucination and what was real, Mr Carsen's production managed to expose the moral decay at the opera's centre, but this on its own was not quite enough to make a strong case for the work itself. Fans of Korngold will undoubtedly find much to enjoy in the production, but those who come in ambivalent may not necessarily emerge converted.