

## *Alone Together*

JESSE SIMON

In the same way that filmmakers of the French new wave turned to pulp detective novels as the raw material for groundbreaking cinematic explorations, Chaya Czernowin's new opera *Heart Chamber* -a commission from the Deutsche Oper, where it recently had its world première- bore a strong structural resemblance to a romantic drama, the kind of formulaic prestige picture for which actors and actresses often win awards. Yet Ms Czernowin's elusive text and polystylistic score made few concessions to anything as obvious as a story. If Claus Guth's elegant staging managed to anchor the opera in just enough narrative reference points to suggest a conventional emotional arc hidden among the fragments, it was Ms Czernowin's daring musical complexity and her capacity for spellbinding moments of abstraction that made *Heart Chamber* a singular experience.

The story, such as it was, was familiar and simple. A man and a woman meet by accident on the street -she drops something, he picks it up- and after some initial awkwardness they end up in a relationship. As they become closer they help one another confront past traumas and disappointments while simultaneously dealing with new uncertainties and vulnerabilities. They end up hurting one another and spend some time apart but are miserable on their own and eventually return to one another, cautiously but with a newfound willingness to accept whatever may develop. Yet Ms Czernowin's text was far less interested in the narrative possibilities of the individual scenes than in reducing them to frozen moments of abstract crisis.

Indeed the text, which often featured repeating phrases, tangential thoughts and overlapping fragments spoken by the two unnamed characters and their inner voices, was inseparable from the work's larger musical conception, in which any stylistic approach was fair game so long as it was deeply unconventional. Thus, in addition to the four principals, the opera featured a prominent part for solo-double bass, and numerous passages for a smaller ensemble of piano, drums, saxophone and electric guitar, all of which were called upon to produce a range of non-standard sounds. There was an additional solo voice who contributed to the texture of the music but didn't sing any narrative lines, as well as a

Guth, Head  
Chamber  
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**Berlin, viernes,  
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de 2019.** Deutsche  
Oper Berlin. *Heart  
Chamber*. Music  
and Text by Chaya Czernowin. Claus Guth,  
director. Patrizia Ciofi (Her). Noa Frenkel  
(Her Inner Voice). Dietrich Henschel  
(Him). Terry Wey (His Inner Voice).  
Frauke Aulbert, voice. Uli Fussenegger,  
double bass. Ensemble Nikel. SWR  
Experimentalstudio. Orchestra of the  
Deutsche Oper Berlin. Johannes Kalitzke,  
conductor



sixteen piece vocal ensemble who sat in the loges and doubled on percussion instruments. All the voices and instruments, even the principal singers, were miked and fed through a series of mixing boards and laptops operated by a four-person mixing crew who processed everything and fed it back into the auditorium in disorienting surround sound.



'Heart Chamber' by Chaya Czernowin. Johannes Kalitzke, conductor.  
Claus Guth, director. Berlin, Deutsche Oper, November 2019. © 2019  
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There was also an orchestra, although they too tended to eschew the sounds normally produced by the standard instrumental groupings in favour of a palette which included dark Tibetan ritual drones, uneasy insect-like pointillism and intimidating amorphous masses. In the course of the evening there were nods to musique concrète, free-improvisation, electro-acoustic sound-art, and even, in one passage, something very close to late-nineties glitch-tronica. If such a vast arsenal of styles and approaches had the potential to be unwieldy, Ms Czernowin was rarely free or careless in her deployment. Indeed her skill lay in the tasteful assembly of

disparate sonic elements, giving each idea its due but never letting any one approach dominate for too long.

As the nature of sound was paramount, the vocal lines were often treated less as a tool for dramatic development than a contributing component within the aural landscape. The two characters and their internal voices spent as much time whispering, breathing, speaking, or creating frantic outpourings of fragmented syllables as they did locking into anything that resembled a traditional line. If this array of extended vocal technique seemed designed to deny us one of the greatest pleasures of the opera house – the carefully crafted notes of a great voice – it also yielded unexpectedly arresting moments: the torrent of barely-verbal sounds that underscored the narration of the female inner voice in the Dream III sequence was as captivating as it was unnerving.

As a counterweight to the fragmentary language and narrative abstraction of the libretto, director Claus Guth opted to ground the action in a more immediately accessible reality. A series of pre-filmed black and white videos showed the characters in their impossibly large, minimally furnished flats and walking down what looked suspiciously like Wilmersdorfer Straße, the pedestrian shopping street just around the corner from the Deutsche Oper. These glimpses of the quotidian provided just enough of a frame



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for the stage action, which unfolded on two recurring sets, a large, modernist house with an imposing exterior staircase (designed,

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apparently, by the male protagonist, who was given the time-honoured romantic-drama profession of architect), and a mostly empty space with two raised platforms on which the characters sat separated from one another by a gulf of darkness.

Although the platforms were sometimes furnished to suggest studies, kitchens and living rooms, the characters remained alone, accompanied only by their inner voices and unable to cross the divide that existed between them; when the stage turned to reveal the house set, they shared the space with a group of indistinct figures who moved in slow motion. There was an isolated, inward quality to even the busiest scenes, and in those moments where the two principal characters nominally occupied the same space, Mr Guth seemed determined to keep them as far apart as possible. If the principal undercurrent in Ms Czernowin's libretto was the difficulties of establishing a genuine emotional connection with another person, Mr Guth's staging magnified those difficulties to a point of crushing insurmountability.

It would be impossible to measure the two central vocal performances against traditional criteria, as the parts moved so quickly between whispers, spoken words, piercing notes and uneasy lines. Certainly anyone who has heard Patrizia Ciofi in a more conventional setting might have wished for more of her singing voice, yet her realisation of the character's complex part was arguably the most impressive aspect of the evening, not merely for the breadth of its technical demands but for Ms Ciofi's ability to corral the continual rapid shifts of mode and mood into a credibly dramatic performance. If Dietrich Henschel's role seemed somewhat more conventional by comparison, it was executed with the same ease of technique, balancing off-kilter glissando passages with crisply enunciated *Sprechgesang*.



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The nature of Ms Czernowin's score, and the disposition of musicians throughout the hall, made it difficult to identify where certain sounds were coming from; despite these disorientation tactics, conductor Johannes Kalitzke maintained a rigorous control over the diverse musical forces, fashioning the most fearsome passages - most notably the challengingly dense dream sequences- into forceful statements while keeping the score's maximalist tendencies in check. The solo double-bass part, which ran through much of the opera but remained separate from its masses of sound, was given a virtuoso performance from the side of the stage by Uli Fussenegger, whose

mastery of extended technique was a delight to behold.

In each of the past four seasons the Deutsche Oper has managed to bring at least one new

work to the stage. Of those works, which have included new operas from Aribert Reimann and Georg Friedrich Haas, *Heart Chamber* is perhaps the most conspicuously challenging, both in its logistical demands and in its composer's restless determination to avoid the easy paths of musical and dramatic expression. Yet *Heart Chamber*, for all its complexity, remained a simple work. Beneath its stylistic plurality, its fragmentary story and its highly distilled characters, there was just enough familiarity to provide the open-minded listener a way into Ms Czernowin's world.

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