

Cold Passions

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For many years now the Staatsoper Berlin's first new production of the year has been scheduled to coincide with the *Tag der deutschen Einheit* – the day marking German reunification – and the combination of a public holiday and a new opera season have traditionally imparted a celebratory air to the evening. This year was noticeably more subdued. Although the Staatsoper, along with most other venues in Berlin, have cautiously reopened their doors after half a year of pandemic-related closure, there is still a palpable sense of things being not quite right; we may all be thankful to be back in the opera house, but with infection rates skyrocketing in Berlin (and elsewhere) the immediate future of cultural life seems as precarious as ever. In this context, Luca Francesconi's *Quartett* – which first appeared in 2011 but was performed on this evening in a new German-language version – was a fitting season opener. Although the production had undoubtedly been scheduled long before the first wave of the COVID pandemic, the opera, a claustrophobic and occasionally harrowing adaptation of Heiner Müller's stage play of the same name, had an edge of lockdown madness that made it especially timely.

Francesconi,
Quartett
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**Berlin, sábado, 3
de octubre de
2020.**

Staatsoper
Unter den Linden.

Luca Francesconi:

Quartett. Barbara Wysocka, director.

Mojca Erdmann (Marquise de Merteuil),

Thomas Oliemans (Vicomte de Valmont),

Francesca Ciaffoni (Dancer), Ségolène

Bresser (Child). IRCAM, Electronics and

Live Sound. Staatskapelle Berlin. Daniel

Barenboim, conductor



Müller's play uses the principal characters and general outline of Choderlos de Laclos' *Les Liaisons dangereuses* as the starting point for a series of elliptical monologues and dialogues in which explorations of sexual power devolve into abstract expressions of isolation, futility and, occasionally, dark humour. While the two figures on stage are listed in the programme as the Marquise de Merteuil and the Vicomte de Valmont, the notion of character remains fluid, with each one cycling through various personae in the course of their scenes together. The text, which provides almost nothing in the way of direction or context, is so full of innuendo that it could be played as an absurdist comedy of manners just as easily as an existential psychodrama. Mr Francesconi's operatic setting favoured the latter approach, setting the fragmented dialogues within a dark, unsettling, at times highly textural sound-world punctuated with electronic buzzes, reverberant scissor snips and primal animal growls. The score itself calls for a modest ensemble accompanied by a team of sound engineers who augment the orchestra with live electronics and pre-recorded choral and orchestral parts, processed in various ways and fed back into the hall through a surround-sound PA. Although there were a few moments of disorientation – most notably

when one could hear a singing voice despite no one on the stage moving their mouth – Mr Francesconi’s electro-acoustic flourishes served more as an enhancement of orchestral texture than a distancing effect.

If the grunts, growls and moans that appeared sporadically throughout the opera served to underscore the base passions guiding the two principal characters, Barbara Wysocka’s monochromatic staging seemed more fascinated with the idea of the drama as an extended role-play session in which the boundaries separating characters (and genders) became blurred. The action took place within a half-submerged concrete globe with an oculus – somewhere between a brutalist Pantheon and a miniature Death Star – and a video projection of an atomic blast during one of the brief orchestral interludes implied that the two characters were stuck together in some kind of bunker, doomed to cycle through the resentments of past seductions until the death of one or the other. In addition to the Marquise and Valmont there were two non-singing characters, a child who appeared to be more a figment of innocent memory than an inhabitant of the post-apocalyptic space, and a dancer who occasionally interacted with Valmont but mostly just moved through the background; neither one added much to or detracted from the action.



Luca Francesconi: Quartett. Daniel Barenboim, conductor. Barbara Wysocka, director. Staatsoper Unter den Linden, October 2020. © 2020 by Monika Rittershaus / Staatsoper unter den Linden.

The staging was undeniably thoughtful and well-considered – even the video projections and extraneous dancing could be overlooked – yet it offered few ironies and fewer delights, compounding the bleak argument of the score without generating much in the way of dramatic spark. In perhaps the opera’s best scene the characters recount Valmont’s seduction of the young Marquise but with each reciting the other’s lines; the role reversal gave the scene a wonderfully caustic edge, as though in throwing dialogue back in each others face they were attempting to expose the cruelty and vacuity of actions long past.

The stage action involved the Marquise wearing Valmont’s trousers and jacket while Valmont slowly re-dressed himself from a box of women’s clothes; it was an intriguing idea but so close to what was already implicit in the text that it ended up robbing the scene of its essential ambiguity. As the confrontation built to its inevitable climax it was, in fact, mildly amusing – in a crudely juvenile sort of way – to watch the Marquise chase Valmont around the stage sporting an unnaturally bouncy strap-on, yet the scene played out with such earnest seriousness that one felt chastised for having derived any enjoyment whatsoever from the sexual power games of the characters. The staging seemed so afraid of breaking its own despairing mood that its few flashes of energy seemed almost accidental; yet a few uninhibited forays into absurdity, crudity or genuine madness might well have enlivened the drama without detracting from the terrifying emptiness in which it was set.

In the staging’s best moments however, the action achieved a hypnotic, almost ritualistic quality, aided by the highly concentrated performances of Mojca Erdmann and Thomas

Oliemans, both of whom remained onstage for nearly the entirety of the opera. Although Mr Francesconi's vocal writing involved some unexpected intervals and dynamic shifts, the demands of the score posed no problems for Ms Erdmann, who was able to strike a consistent balance between the long-term melodic logic of the vocal lines and a dramatic elucidation of the text. Despite the luxurious breadth of her lower register, her opening monologue had a cool clarity – even in the most expressive passages – that was essential to her conception of the Marquise: she seemed to realise that a mask of indifference and superiority was her best defence against Valmont's self-assurance. What gave Ms Erdmann's scenes their subtle complexity was the sense that behind the composed façade was a lifetime of hurt and resentment threatening to spill out. Mr Oliemans had fewer extended monologues – the opera occasionally treated Valmont more as a sounding board for the Marquise than a fully fledged character – but as a vocal presence he was equally impressive, commanding and resolute even in the handful of passages that pushed upward beyond the normal baritone range.



Luca Francesconi: *Quartett*. Daniel Barenboim, conductor. Barbara Wysocka, director. Staatsoper Unter den Linden, October 2020. © 2020 by Monika Rittershaus / Staatsoper unter den Linden.



Luca Francesconi: *Quartett*. Daniel Barenboim, conductor. Barbara Wysocka, director. Staatsoper Unter den Linden, October 2020. © 2020 by Monika Rittershaus / Staatsoper unter den Linden.

The reasonably small live ensemble and prerecorded choir were unintentionally but fortuitously tailored to the current age of social distancing. Between the musical direction of Daniel Barenboim, who drew long, slowly-evolving phrases and delicate textures from the Staatskapelle, and the engineers from IRCAM at the back of the hall, the music emerged as vibrant, unified and wholly immersive, rarely drawing attention to the methods of its own construction. Yet despite the fine performances, a fascinating score and a text that was endlessly provocative in the best sense of that word, the production never

quite transformed its disconsolate pessimism into a state of catharsis. *Quartett* was undeniably the right work to open such an uncertain season, and it may simply be that the gloomy argument of the opera, and the exacerbating bleakness of the staging captured the spirit of the present moment a little too well.