

Journey to the Threshold

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Richard Strauss and Hugo von Hofmannsthal had drawn upon classical sources in two of their earlier collaborations, but with *Die Frau ohne Schatten* they set out to construct a mythological world entirely of their own making. The opera was arguably their greatest work, and certainly their most ambitious, but it was not an immediate success. Only in the decades following the second world war did it enjoy the resurgence it deserved, but its greatest champions in those years – Kempe, Keilberth and, especially, Karl Böhm – were also its most subtle betrayers, setting a precedent of drastic cuts in the second and third acts that has survived into the present century. For all that the music is now revered for the clarity of its expression, the score itself remains prone to mistreatment.

Fortunately this is starting to change: the centenary production in Vienna, conducted by Christian Thielemann, offered a chance to hear the work complete on stage, while a concert performance in Berlin under Vladimir Jurowski that same year also presented the work uncut. The most recent performance of the full work came from Kirill Petrenko and the Berlin Philharmonic, who gave a one-off concert performance at the Philharmonie following a series of performances at the Baden Baden Easter festival. Mr Petrenko is no stranger to the work: *Die Frau* was the first opera he conducted on taking up his position as musical director of the Bayerische Staatsoper in 2013. A decade later, and free from the pressures of a staging, Mr Petrenko offered a leaner, darker, more urgent vision: with a superb quintet of principal voices and an energized orchestra, the evening offered a thrilling, sometimes terrifying journey through some of Strauss's most awe-inspiring music.

Die Frau can be a difficult work to stage convincingly and there are certainly arguments in favour of experiencing it in a concert hall. Admittedly some of beautifully-illustrated supernatural elements are more effective when presented in visual form, and in the course of the evening there were a handful of lines that lost their dramatic force for being addressed to a character who had left the stage several minutes earlier. But for anyone



Kirill Petrenko © Johannes Simon/dpa
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Philharmonie. Strauss: *Die Frau ohne Schatten*. Concert performance. Clay Hilley (Kaiser), Elza van den Heever (Kaiserin), Michaela Schuster (Amme), Wolfgang Kock (Barak), and Miina-Liisa Värelä (Färberin). Berlin Philharmonic. Kirill Petrenko, conductor.

familiar with the story – or who didn't require the crutch of narrative drama – the advantages of the concert scenario were obvious: the singers, unencumbered by costumes and stage action, were able to craft lucid, nuanced performances in an auditorium highly sympathetic to the human voice.

Certainly there were no weaknesses among the five principals: although each of them had experience of their respective roles on stage, Michaela Schuster's magnificent embodiment of the Nurse retained a strongly theatrical essence even in the concert hall. Yet the anguished glances, otherworldly stares and occasional dramatic gestures were never allowed to eclipse the careful phrasing that gave her interpretation its captivating focus. While Ms Schuster was not afraid to express the Nurse's dim view of humanity with a caustic sneer, her refusal to treat the character as the principal antagonist yielded a figure of rare complexity: the commanding tone with which she placed herself subtly at the centre of the second act finale was no less convincing than the genuine terror she brought to the scene at the threshold in the third; and despite her calculating actions, she remained sympathetic enough that one felt pity at her banishment.

Wolfgang Koch, an excellent Barak on stage, was even more impressive in the intimate acoustic of the Philharmonie, which accentuated his expressive warmth and gentle fluidity of line. In Barak's first scene with his wife, one of the high points of the first act, Mr Koch allowed the dyer's desire for children to emerge with a nobility untarnished by frustration or resentment; even his quiet disappointment at the end of the act was underlined with affection and understanding. The saintly patience he displayed in the face of the Färberin's increasingly frantic taunting in the second act made the violent fury of the act's conclusion all the more striking; yet such was the guilt in his lament at the beginning of the third act that it would have been difficult not to forgive him.

As the Kaiserin, Elza van den Heever had a fine opening scene, with the lightness and agility of her first lines darkening at the falcon's prophecy. But it was not until the second act, when she emerged from the dream interlude with an urgent despair to match the ferocity of the orchestra, that the full power of her performance revealed itself. By the third act she was the dominant force in the drama, bringing a mixture of sadness and resolve to her parting with the nurse and building her climactic monologue towards a moment of profound catharsis.

Miina-Liisa Värelä's Färberin also revealed the qualities of her performance with patient restraint. In the first act one was impressed by her range, and especially the fullness of tone in the lower passages, but there was a reticence in her interactions with both Barak and her mystery visitors. In the second act, however, she was the dominant figure: in the central dialogue with Barak the cruelty of her words seemed to come not from malevolence but desperation, and her increasing frustration in that scene laid the foundation for a highly-charged second act finale in which her momentary triumph gave way to sudden horror.

Clay Hilley's first appearance as the Kaiser, although lacking nothing in vocal power or emotional weight, had a cultivated quality with crisp consonants and aristocratically rolled Rs. This continued into the beginning of second act monologue, but soon vanished as the Kaiser's confidence was replaced with anguish. By the time he rejoined the action at the

end of the third act all trace of mannerism had vanished and the heroic ardour of his delivery suggested an emperor who was as happy as Barak to be alive. And while the principal singers dominated much of the evening, the performance also possessed a strong Spirit Messenger in the form of Bogdan Baciú, and an unusually fine trio of Barak's brothers sung by Johannes Weisser, Nathan Berg and Peter Hoare.

It was Kirill Petrenko, however, who remained the engine of the evening. His reading, which relied on extreme dynamic contrasts, often lacked subtlety, and the sounds he conjured from the orchestra, while never brash, were sometimes unexpectedly loud, with brass dominating the strings in many crucial passages. Nor did Mr Petrenko display much interest in highlighting the score's most conspicuously beautiful passages: one longed for a shade more indulgence during that beautiful pause in the conversation between Barak and the Färberin in the first act, and the first *Zwischenspiel* of the second act, despite its beautifully played solo cello, never quite captured its elusive magic.

Yet the evening's minor shortcomings were insignificant in the face of a frequently monumental performance that embraced the opera's emotional extremes without reservation. Indeed it would be difficult to imagine another conductor who could sustain such a high level of intensity throughout the length of the opera without sacrificing precision or control. Mr Petrenko favoured urgent tempi that kept the drama moving at a brisk pace without sounding overdriven, and even the handful of conspicuously driven moments paid off: the *Erdenflug* interlude of the first act had a machine-age relentlessness, but it made a thrilling transition into the chaotic argument of the brothers.

The tempi, however, were less notable than Mr Petrenko's willingness to push the opera's most volatile passages to their very limit. In the second act, especially, he seemed to take the action from peak to peak, from the despairing exclamations of the Kaiser and the Färberin's provocation of Barak to the Kaiserin's terrifying dream, and a concluding scene of such wild intensity that many in the audience – and on stage – were left breathless. Whatever the act may have lacked in finesse it made up for in the unvarnished directness of its expression.

If the evening was dominated by the violence of its most dramatic moments, there was ample beauty to be found as well, not merely in the vocal performances but also in the solo violin of Noah Bendix-Balgley, whose subtle accentuation of the Kaiserin's lines culminated in a rapturous introduction to the third act monologue. And if Mr Petrenko seemed most inspired by the opera's capacity for darkness, he did not deny us the ecstasies of the conclusion; indeed, after an evening of such heightened intensity the celebratory euphoria of the final quartet seemed all the more deserved.