

Georges Delnon

Selection criteria for commissioning and follow-up

I'll try to express myself as well as I can in English, with some thoughts about this subject - perhaps from a bit more distance than [the talks of] yesterday. My job is running a theatre in Switzerland, in Basel; and also I run a festival in Schwetzingen. And I think from this job I would say that it's a big privilege we have, and I think it's a very elitist job we do, because we have a big responsibility. We have not only to follow the taste of our audience or follow commercial success, we have to imagine, to feel what opera could be tomorrow: what could be the important thematic matters; what are the strong testimonials of our time in perhaps 200 years; what direction could opera take. And I think that's why we have a big responsibility. We have to take a lot of risks, and of course it's always a very subjective, very personal decision we make. I make regularly two commissions, I give two commissions, a year; one for Basel and one for Schwetzingen. And there are perhaps slightly different criteria.

I think that for Basel, for me, it's important that we try to get closer with new opera to a normal audience; a normal audience in the sense of the same audience that goes to Idomeneo or to Rigoletto, and we want to reach the same audience. We try to make an opera season where new opera is integrated, is part of a normal season; and of course we are always thinking about what subject, what is the way to do this; and of course it helps a lot when we have a libretto, for instance, or we have a story, we have real characters on stage, we have real emotions between the singers or the actors. This helps this audience a lot, I think, to get involved in this new music and sometimes, yes, sometimes it's really fantastic to see how well it

suits the audience, and how they begin to understand what new music does for them.

And then I think it's very important for us not only to create new work, but sometimes to give operas a second chance. We have a lot, lots of operas that are created, because we have the media, we have the newspapers; but afterwards, nobody cares. And I think it's also important to give pieces a second chance; for instance I did Peter Ruzicka's CELAN a second time in my German time and it was a big success. And of course it is always thrilling, trying to be better than the first production. Or to tell more with it. And so in Basel, I will do Schneewittchen by Holliger because I think it needs a second chance and I am convinced that Heinz Holliger is one of the greatest composers we have in the world. So, this is my Basel job. And then in the Schwetzingen Festival, it's a bit different.

The SWR Festival of Schwetzingen. I cannot underline enough how important this festival is; and I don't know if in English you can say it's under a good star, but it's incredible what results we've had over the last ten, twelve years. When we think for instance of the three operas of Salvatore Sciarrino, which were all created in Schwetzingen, or the operas of Hölsky or Bernhard Lang. And now three years ago I did Proserpina with Wolfgang Rihm. Last year, with the Ensemble InterContemporain we did Le Père by Jarrel, and this year we did Bluthaus with Händl Klaus and Georg Friedrich Haas.

It's perhaps a bit of a different way of thinking, because it's a small theatre, a Baroque theatre; we have no audience problems. Fantastic! In bigger theatres we have audience problems; but in Schwetzingen the audience come for this, they expect something new, something innovative. So of course it is much easier for me to

programme for this; and also of course the radio is always there and we are often also on T.V. For me this is more laboratory perhaps; I'm more interested in new ways, new things, new forms, new contents, and it's always a big thrill to prepare a new creation for Schwetzingen. And sometimes I almost think, if it's only done in Schwetzingen, so what? It's okay. If nobody wants to replay it, okay. We try something out in Schwetzingen, and I think it's important that such festivals exist.

So, also for the future we are planning now some operas. I have two criteria in Schwetzingen. One is the money, of course – not everything is possible and you know it can become very, very expensive when composers need electronic, the newest electronic equipment. This can be very expensive. And the second criteria is performability. I remember a symposium about new opera some years ago in Germany, where the composer Claus-Steffen Mahnkopf said that the unperformability of an opera is a quality criterion, [audience laughter]. We know every variant. You know, where the top of the opera opens, and we see the sky, or a helicopter or a plane coming; or the whole theatre on the water. Hard to do! Difficult to do! But, sometimes composers have strange ideas; and, well, sometimes we try to realise it, but the performability is also, of course, an important criterion. Another criterion in Schwetzingen is, of course, trying to use SWR ensembles, like the RSO Stuttgart, SWR Vokalensemble or the Experimentalstudio Fribourg. But I think we're very lucky, it's a great opportunity we have in Germany with SWR or WDR who do such things.

The third thing perhaps I would mention is the Biennale in Munich. For me, perhaps, it is one of the most important festivals we have for new opera in Europe. And I was three times, now, the director in

Munich and I just mention this only to give examples, thinking about librettos. In 2006, I did 22,13 by Marc André. It was really a very interesting thing; he needed for his opera only three sentences, – of course from the Bible, from Johannes Apokalyptic –, but for me it was okay. He was able to compose two hours of great music on, or about, or for, these three sentences; and for me it was a fantastic experience to see this. And the second production was Hellhörig by Carola Bauckholt, she was a student of Mauricio Kagel, a libretto with not one word. It was only noises, but very special noises; and also the singers, they made only noises. And so it was a really specific work on this, so we decided in the end not to do a staging – a normal staging like in the theatre –, but we made some installations, to make these noises very plastic; and the libretto, in the end, was the movement of the instrumentalists and the singers. And the third experience was last year, with Philipp Maintz's Maldoror. This was really the opposite, it had an enormous amount of text – Lautréamont, Les Chants de Maldoror, incredible long text, in French. And it was impossible to understand, I think, for the audience one word of this. So it was also an opera without dialogue, much more on thoughts and feelings and so, with the text, we made the sets of the stage, with the text. And I'm telling you this because sometimes I ask myself why composers, avant-garde or who think they belong to the avant-garde, are so afraid of text and of librettists. Perhaps they are afraid of the confrontation, of the fight, but I think sometimes it needs the fight; the fight is good for the result, at the end, for the artistic result, and sometimes, yes, I would have more of this fight and I think it's very important.

But of course I see there are other tendencies which are very serious; mostly now opera still comes from a musical idea, the first idea is a

musical idea and I think that more and more the first idea could be a visual idea. For instance we in Basel, we're now making a co-production which will have the premiere in ten days, 9th July, with Marina Abramovic, Bob Wilson, and Willem Dafoe, and the new music is by Antony Hegarty. I don't know if you know him, in the pop scene. He's famous, Antony and the Johnsons, and this spectacle comes from a visual idea by Marina Abramovic and Wilson. It's a co-production with Manchester and Madrid, Teatro Real; and we are very curious to see how the whole thing will work.

But I think opera is today more than music; opera is a word which has a sense in itself. And of course I can imagine that more and more artists will try to give another idea of opera from a visual point of view and, perhaps, it will be interesting once to have an opera from a text point of view. To start from a word or from a text, this could also be interesting.

So, I can only give impulses. I also have a project with a composer who wants to do something only for chorus and light. I don't know if it is enough. Also if it's James Turrell who makes the light; I don't know. But why not try? For me it's important to give impulses, to try to give new ideas, and sometimes when I feel a bit more sure, to bring people together. And one of these ideas was to bring the Austrian composer Georg Friedrich Haas, - who you know perhaps from "in vain", or you know perhaps from his operas Adolf Wölfli, Nacht, and, at the Paris opera, Melancholia -, with another Austrian artist Händl Klaus, a writer who has written fantastic plays. We also performed his plays in Basel, and in the whole German speaking world, and now all over the world. And to bring them together because, I don't know, it was a gut feeling; I felt that they had something in common, perhaps in the past, and in the future, it could be the right confrontation. And as a result we did Bluthaus two

months ago, in Schwetzingen, which was also a big success. Not only for the audience and for the media, but also for me it was one of the strongest experiences I've had yet in opera. And we are also planning something new.

So I began by saying that we have a very elitist job, and I think we shouldn't be afraid of this word. Because I think it is like this, and this searching for quality, and this searching only for new possibilities is the motor for creation. Thank you.