

GAGOSIAN GALLERY

Kiefer Towers Spook Bastille as Mortier Finally Leaves: Review

Review by Jorg von Uthmann



July 9 (Bloomberg) -- The late French President Francois Mitterrand likely would have been amazed that the Bastille Opera in Paris is celebrating its 20th anniversary with a commissioned work that is the opposite of what he meant to create -- a “people’s opera.”

“Am Anfang” (In the Beginning) isn’t even an opera. It’s an installation by Anselm Kiefer, the German painter and sculptor, with music by his compatriot Jorg Widmann and readings from the Old Testament.

In the absence of a native artist of international standing, the French have adopted Kiefer, who has been living in their midst since 1993, as a national standard-bearer.

In 2007, he was chosen to reopen the Great Hall of the Grand Palais, the glass-and-steel exhibition space on the Avenue des Champs-Elysees, with a monumental solo show. Later that year, the Louvre invited him to decorate one of its staircases, an honor that hadn’t been bestowed upon a living artist for half a century.

The focus of Kiefer's show at the Grand Palais was a trio of concrete towers in various states of collapse. On the stage of the Bastille Opera, the towers have multiplied, creating the eerie image of a ghost town.

Before you see the structures, a map of the Fertile Crescent tells you where to direct your imagination -- to the region stretching from Egypt to the Persian Gulf that saw so many empires rise and fall.

Originally, Kiefer wanted the audience to walk around and take a close look at his work on stage. The management of the house talked him out of it. So what you see is only one aspect of his sculpture park, bathed in subtly changing light.

Ruins and Shadows

Two female characters, both dressed in white, stroll through the ruins. One is, the program tells you, Shekinah, the manifestation of God's presence among the children of Israel. The other, a redhead, is the evil spirit Lilith, in legend Adam's first wife.

More women emerge from the shadows. First, you only hear them breaking stones; then they build a wall which, at the end after 80 minutes, Lilith destroys.

It's mysterious and beautiful.

Widmann, who conducts a big orchestra, rolls out a carpet of delicate, mildly atonal sounds -- shapeless yet pleasing, a mix of New Age ambiance and sensuousness.

Except for a brief women's chorus, nobody sings. Instead, the actress Genevieve Boivin recites passages from the books of Isaiah and Jeremiah. The anguished visions of the prophets, Kiefer believes, have lost nothing of their topicality.

The work is Gerard Mortier's finale after five years as director of the Paris Opera. When he took over from the urbane Hugues Gall, in 2004, the Belgian annoyed many subscribers by declaring that the repertory would henceforth be dominated by 20th-

century works. Mortier, with his infinite capacity for pomposity, also let it be known that he hated Puccini, one of the public's darlings.

Booing Orgies

Although what followed was less radical, tensions remained. Booing orgies at opening nights became a ritual, particularly when one of Mortier's pet directors had yet again succeeded in turning an opera upside down.

Mortier was offended when, on one of those lively occasions, the cry "Mortier au bucher!" (Mortier to the stake!) was heard. In interviews, he accused Parisians of musical illiteracy and compared them to Proust's Madame Verdurin, a smug dame de salon who complains that Wagner's music gives her a headache.

Mortier's Disdain

Surprisingly, attendance didn't drop. With an average of 92 percent of seats filled, Mortier is leaving the Paris Opera without inflicting too much damage. He seems to have managed, thanks to new sponsors, to increase the self-financed portion of the budget to 45 percent from 39 percent. (The rest is subsidized by the taxpayers so disdained by Mortier.) He is now at the opera in Madrid, after stiffing, mortally it seems, the New York City Opera.

Nicolas Joel, Mortier's successor, who has led the Theatre du Capitole in Toulouse for almost 20 years, couldn't be more different. His announcement that the next season will open with Gounod's "Mireille," a work even traditionalists dismiss as passe, is like a slap in his predecessor's face.

Vocal Stars

Other operas will be staged mainly as star vehicles -- Bellini's "La Sonnambula" for Natalie Dessay, Rossini's "La Donna del Lago" for Juan Diego Florez, and Massenet's "Werther" for Jonas Kaufmann.

Yet the next season also offers the first installment of a fresh production of Wagner's "Ring," conducted by the new musical director, Philippe Jordan. The cycle hasn't been seen at the Paris Opera for more than 50 years.

"Am Anfang" is in repertory through July 14. Entry to the last performance, on Bastille Day, is free. For details, go to <http://www.operadeparis.fr> or call +33-1-7229-3535.

(Jorg von Uthmann is a critic for Bloomberg News. The opinions expressed are his own.)

To contact the writer on the story: Jorg von Uthmann in Paris at uthmann@wanadoo.fr

Last Updated: July 8, 2009 19:00 EDT