

**Paul Dessau: Lanzelot**

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GRAMOPHONE

Cultural history written by the victors can overstate the divergence of communism and capitalism, complicity and dissent, socialist realism and Western modernism. Some themes have a universal resonance. Or so the (East) German composer Paul Dessau (1894-1979) seemed to want to demonstrate in his third opera, *Lanzelot*. An ambitious, uncompromisingly abrasive work comprising 15 scenes, it was first staged in 1969 and barely aired again until the 2019 Weimar revival from which this recording is taken. Its jaundiced fairy-tale narrative implies that societies of whatever sort will always prefer the devil they know to the uncertain prospect of liberation.

Audite's booklet contains plenty of production pics and the conductor's own listening guide but for the libretto you'll need online access and proficient German. The plot is surreal, the setting a stone-age community with health and governance issues. Still, its thrust is clear. The protagonist is a do-gooder whose dragon-slaying efforts are impeded by bureaucratic interference and general indifference. At length the dragon is slain and by the time our hero recovers from his wounds the mayor has taken over, another kind of 'dragon' cheered on by the hidebound community. Victory celebrations are swallowed up by cacophony. Is there a happy ending or must all leaders become dictators in the end? On the occasion of the 20th anniversary of the founding of the GDR, Dessau dedicated his fable to 'everyone who fights and works for socialism in our republic'. His librettist Heiner Müller (1929-95), a progenitor of postmodern theatre frequently out of favour with the regime, was effectively banned from East German stages at the time (despite which it was of course necessary to present *Lanzelot*'s social critique as applicable only to Western conditions). Half a century later, Peter Konwitschny's acclaimed revamp challenged audiences with the arrival on stage of a fully occupied refugee boat.

Musically speaking, we range wider than might have been expected. Dessau's idiom is essentially post-Second Viennese School (bad enough for officialdom) but his skill set here admits aleatoric elements, agitprop, Hollywood film music, the sleazier aspects of jazz-pop, chamber music intimacy and an important taped element. The list is endless. Mightily impressed by Bernd Alois Zimmermann's *Die Soldaten* (premiered on the other side of the Iron Curtain in 1965), Dessau keeps the ear engaged with parody, allusion and 13 percussionists, self-consciously cutting-edge.

The Prelude briefly presents an Eden of consonance and birdsong before we are catapulted into a grimmer, fragmented reality. An early appearance of the waltz from Tchaikovsky's *Eugene Onegin* presumably signals decadent jollification but not all the reminiscences seem designed to be picked up. Also lacking is the melodic



distinction that his more circumspect fellow Brechtians, Kurt Weill and Hanns Eisler, habitually brought to the table. Amid the sound and fury some of the most memorable passages are intimate in nature, such as scene 14's dialogue between lead baritone and solo cello.

The performance would appear to be first-rate. Máté Solyom-Nagy projects warmth and dignity in the title-role while Emily Hindrichs navigates Elsa's stratospheric line with remarkable aplomb. The outsize orchestra does its best with Dessau's impossibilist demands – the conductor apparently spent a year preparing viable material – and the sinister, rumbling electronics are well conveyed. As with any little-known and complex opera, particularly one conceived as a 'total work of art', the lack of any visual dimension is likely to restrict the potential audience to initiates. A challenging listen for the rest of us.



Dessau

Lanzelot
 Emily Hindrichs sop Elsa
 Máté Solyom-Nagy bar Lanzelot
 Oleksandr Pushniak bar Dragon
 Juri Batukov bar Charlesmagne
 Wolfgang Schwaninger ten Mayor
 Uwe Stickert ten Heinrich
 Daniela Gerstenmeyer sop Cat
 Andreas Koch bass Medicine Man
 Choruses of the Deutsches Nationaltheater
 Weimar and Erfurt Theatre; Schola Cantorum
 Weimar; Staatskapelle Weimar /
 Dominik Beykirsch
 Audite (AUDITE23-448 © + 129)
 Recorded live, November 23, 2019
 Includes synopsis. German libretto available from
 audite.de



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Engaged with parody and allusion. Paul Dessau's challenging third opera *Lanzelot* was first staged in 1969 and revived in 2019 in Weimar