

Dessau's *Magic Flute*



Paul Dessau (1894-1979)

LANZELOT

Opera in 15 pictures based on motifs by Hans Christian Andersen and the fairy tale comedy *The Dragon* by Evgeny Schwartz.

Paul Dessau's opera *Lanzelot* was one of the most significant and elaborate operas to be premiered in the GDR – a political fairy tale of the people who would rather live under the protection of a tyrant than dare try true freedom. More than half a century after its East Berlin premiere (1969), Dessau's magnum opus is released on CD for the first time in an exemplary recording by the Nationaltheater Weimar.



Music history encompasses masterpieces which are simply forgotten for a while before being rediscovered in a later era when they act as a mirror of current sensitivities: prominent examples include Mozart's *La clemenza di Tito*, Schubert's "Unfinished Symphony" or Erich Wolfgang Korngold's opera *Die tote Stadt*. The reasons for such oblivion are manifold – in the case of Paul Dessau's fairy tale opera *Lanzelot*, they are almost certainly political. This also has to do with the fact that Dessau (1894-1979), the son of a Jewish tobacconist from Hamburg, settled in the Soviet occupation zone after exile during the Second World War and lived until his death as a politically loyal but also thoroughly dissident citizen of the GDR.

Through his collaboration with Bertolt Brecht, at the age of sixty Dessau discovered music theatre for himself, whose sole *raison d'être*, according to him, was to fulfil a political didactic role. Twice he set texts by Brecht to music; for his third opera he turned to the fairy tale *The Dragon* by the Soviet author Evgeny Schwartz, which the playwright Heiner Müller, alongside Ginka Tcholakova, adapted for him, creating the libretto for *Lanzelot*. The plot is so controversial that even the original was banned under Stalin. A dragon who liberated the people from

cholera a very long time ago now heads up a totalitarian regime, but is loved by his people as he guarantees them order and materialistic wellbeing. The appearance of the self-proclaimed libertarian hero Lancelot triggers resistance among the citizens; in the end, the question emerges as to whether the people are really ready for revolution.

Surprisingly, the material did not meet with resistance from the GDR authorities at the premiere at the (East) Berlin State Opera in December 1969; the production by Ruth Berghaus, Dessau's wife, was restrained in its political statement. Yet Dessau's music was among the most modern and provocative that was permitted in the GDR at the time. The demands on the soloists, chorus and orchestra are colossal, a richly equipped percussion section provides punch, and the composer also makes use of recordings to be played in the auditorium. Nowhere in his oeuvre does Dessau offer up a greater variety of musical styles; from baroque *concerto grosso* and romantic parodies to agitprop music and modern sounds, he pulls out all the stops. With its plurality of musical styles and its appeal to muster enough courage for true freedom, *Lanzelot* is the East German counterpart to the equally ambitious "total theatre" piece *Die Soldaten* by Bernd Alois Zimmermann.

Lanzelot only saw three productions during Dessau's lifetime, then the piece disappeared from the stage, and a recording was never made. Only fifty years after the premiere did the Nationaltheater Weimar and the Theater Erfurt dare to take on the challenges of this opera once again. In late 2019, *Lanzelot* was performed in Weimar in a production by Peter Konwitschny and directed by Dominik Beykirch; unfortunately, the planned subsequent run at Erfurt was thwarted by the COVID-19 pandemic. This edited live recording proves the power of Paul Dessau's music and message, which still makes it burningly relevant today, three decades after the end of the Cold War.

Elsa Emily Hindrichs
Lanzelot Máté Sólyom-Nagy
Dragon Oleksandr Pushniak
Charlesmagne Juri Batukov
Mayor Wolfgang Schwaninger
Heinrich Uwe Stickert

Opera Chorus of DNT
Choir of the Erfurt Theatre
Children's choir schola cantorum weimar
Staatskapelle Weimar
Music Director Dominik Beykirch
Director Peter Konwitschny



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