

Electronic nightmares on Bluebeard's battlements

A new production of Béla Bartók's psychological masterpiece turns to multimedia to explore the minds of its protagonists. Jessica Duchen hears how it is being done

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Blue screen: filming visuals for the final room of Bluebeard's Castle

A door opens upon the magnificent garden of Duke Bluebeard's castle. Vivid, closely-filmed detail homes in on its glorious white roses. But all is not as it seems in this castle of the human mind. As the music suggests the flowers filling with blood, the delicate veins of their petals begin to turn red before our eyes.

Actually, it's only food dye. The film-maker Nick Hillel, creative director of the digital studio Yeast Culture, is giving me a sneak peek at his projected visuals for Béla Bartók's one-act opera – an ambitious project that's the culmination of *Infernal Dance*, the Philharmonia Orchestra's year-long exploration of the great Hungarian composer.

Composed between 1911 and 1917, the work involves only two singers. Duke Bluebeard's bride, Judith, demands to learn the secrets that lie behind the seven doors of his castle. As she opens each in turn, the tableaux become more terrifying: a torture chamber, an armoury, the treasury, the garden, his kingdom, a lake of tears. Ultimately Judith falls victim to the final room, which hides the living memories of his past loves. Drawing upon Symbolist and psychoanalytical influences, the multi-layered meanings become personal and different for every listener. And by presenting the opera in concert with filmed visualisations, Hillel and the Philharmonia's principal conductor, Esa-Pekka Salonen, have devised an ingenious new way to envelop the audience in Bartók's emotional labyrinth.

"For me perhaps the most important aspect of Bartók is the scorching intensity of expression, which is always laced with a profound sadness," Salonen says. "Bluebeard is a case in point, and it's a work that can suffer from staging. Sometimes directors panic because there's almost no physical action; it all happens within the minds of the protagonists. How do you deal with inner psychology on stage? I thought that multimedia production, as opposed to theatrical production, would be the best solution."

Hillel and Salonen had already worked together on the Philharmonia's Re-Rite: a video project enabling visitors to experience what it's like to be inside an orchestra performing Stravinsky's *The Rite of Spring*, it has been a runaway success since its unveiling two years ago. Hillel specialises in combining live performance and video, and has worked with high-profile creative colleagues like the composer Nitin Sawhney and the choreographer Akram Khan. For him, *Bluebeard* is the project of a lifetime.

"I'm more excited about this than anything else we've worked on, massively so," he says. "It's a combination of the substantial length of the time we've had to produce the work, the quality we're working with, and exactly the chance that I wanted to move away from the big screen."

Instead of a single screen above the orchestra, the visualisations will appear on a series of "turrets" arrayed around the platform – plus a set of three central "sails" which, Hillel says, "gradually unravel like a piece of origami".

The aim is to unite the idea of the castle's towers with the inner images of its secret chambers and of *Bluebeard's* subconscious. "What appealed to me was the music's recurring motifs, and how we could go about realising these on the screens," says Hillel. "I can see the narrative in the music – there's a blood motif, for instance, or the shuddering castle motif. Bartók gives human attributes to the castle; my challenge as a visualiser was to try to realise the idea of a castle being within a man's psyche."

Hillel and his team set out to create "something that felt hand-made". Everything they have filmed was natural, found or bought cheaply, then ingeniously transformed to match Bartók's psychological and musical symbolism. The white flowers and their red food-dye were filmed in a box across several days. The treasury scene involved painting a piece of rock quartz with gold leaf and filming it on a record player's turntable. "For the torture chamber," adds Hillel, "we rooted around in junk shops and found all sorts of strange pieces of machinery which we filmed from weird angles." Pin cushions, sewing machines, the most unlikely objects become fair game for Hillel's flights of filmed fantasy.

In the last room, the culmination of the drama brings the unfortunate Judith face to face with *Bluebeard's* former wives. The opera presents three of them, each associated with a different time of day; Judith is forced to join them as *Bluebeard's* "bride of night".

"Esa-Pekka opened a brilliant idea for the room which has much more resonance and is unlike anything I've seen in *Bluebeard* before," says Hillel. "It's a subtle shift in concept that suggests the lovers of a lifetime." Salonen comments that this particular scene is always the most difficult.

"We can't treat *Bluebeard* as a Hungarian version of Henry VIII, chopping the heads off his wives, mostly for practical reasons," he remarks, "but that's the way it often comes out – a

monstrous, Hannibal Lecter-like idea. That's too simple and I don't think it's what Bartók had in mind. The opera's narration before the drama starts says that this is 'theatre of your eyelids' – yours as spectators – for this could be happening to you.

"I tend to agree with Peter Bartók [one of the composer's sons] that it is about memory," he continues, "specifically a middle-aged man's reluctance to accept the passage of time. In the second half of your life the ratio between memories and the future changes every day in favour of the memories. Judith is trying to make Bluebeard live in the moment, but he's unable to do that. He's forever trapped in the memories of his youth."

The turrets require huge technical expertise to present – for a start, each one needs its own video stream, which means that Hillel has had to create about eight hours of footage for the 80-minute work. All of these streams must be perfectly co-ordinated with the music and each other in live, spontaneous performance. And in certain venues there isn't room for some of the portions of screen, "which means we've had to create two different versions," Hillel says. The first performance will be in Birmingham; it then tours in the UK and abroad.

The bigger the challenge, though, perhaps the bigger the reward. The musical side promises much even before the visuals are added, as Sir John Tomlinson is singing the role of Bluebeard and the mezzo-soprano Michelle DeYoung is Judith.

And with so many top-level creatives aboard, Bartók's monumental score and its fantastical images should pack a tremendous emotional punch.

'Duke Bluebeard's Castle', Symphony Hall, Birmingham, 21 October; Anvil, Basingstoke, 26 October; Royal Festival Hall, London SE1, 3 November (www.philharmonia.co.uk)