

Georg Friedrich Haas on 'Morgen und Abend': 'I don't do melodies'

'Expect soundscapes, not harmonies', says the composer of his Covent Garden premiere.

by Jessica Duchon, 10th November 2015

Commissioning a new work for the UK's leading opera house involves a considerable leap of faith. On Friday the Royal Opera presents the world premiere of *Morgen und Abend* (Morning and Evening) by Georg Friedrich Haas. Directed by Graham Vick, it is a co-commission with the Deutsche Oper Berlin and the first opera by a non-UK composer in quite a while to enjoy its initial unveiling on Covent Garden's main stage.

Other premieres at the Royal Opera, such as Harrison Birtwistle's *The Minotaur*, George Benjamin's *Written on Skin* and Thomas Adès's *The Tempest* have been runaway successes; Mark-Anthony Turnage's *Anna Nicole* grabbed headlines and sparked controversy, while Judith Weir's *Miss Fortune* (2012) was less warmly welcomed. But these UK composers are more generally familiar to audiences here than Haas, who is 62 and from Graz in Austria.

Haas's path to fame has been slow and often difficult. He has spoken of feeling that he was an outsider from the start, experiencing the mountainous scenery around his home as oppressive and finding it uncomfortable to be a Protestant in a largely Catholic land. Perhaps his most vital breakthrough is in vain, composed in 2000, which Sir Simon Rattle described as "an acknowledged masterpiece of the 21st century". Inspirations for his unconventional sonic canvases range from political awareness to the music of Schubert; and his obsessions include images of darkness and light, with lighting design often part and parcel of his works. He is particularly known for his use of microtones – tiny subdivisions of pitch in between the usual notes.

"Don't expect melodies," Haas has remarked of *Morgen und Abend*. "Don't expect harmonies, just expect soundscapes. I try to create a musical language which is not based on notated structures, but only based on the perception of sound."

Indeed, *Morgen und Abend* seems all about the unknowable spaces between worlds – sonic, conceptual and spiritual. It is based on a short novel by the Norwegian author Jon Fosse, whose multiple awards include the 2014 European Prize for Literature and who has written the libretto himself. It offers a poetic and startlingly

powerful exploration of one man's birth and death. In the first part, a fisherman, Olai (a speaking role, taken by the great Austrian actor Klaus Maria Brandauer), waits in the next room while his son, Johannes, is born; in the second, Johannes gradually realises he is dead when his daughter Signe walks straight through his invisible spirit.

Microtones, too, explore subtle spaces where we might think nothing could exist. The soprano Sarah Wegener, who works frequently with Haas and for whom he has written the roles of Signe and the Midwife, has a great deal of experience with microtonal music and encourages audiences to open their ears to the unusual sounds: "It brings a new dimension to your experience," she says. "It's like going in a space where you first thought there was none, then discovering that it is a lot of space! The hardest thing about singing microtones is to spread the mind. It's like singing yoga."

Kasper Holten, director of opera at the ROH, has had no hesitation in making the necessary leap of faith where Haas's music is concerned. "Haas writes music of real beauty and intensity," he says. "It creates sound worlds that you didn't know before, and it can draw you into a different reality, where you are offered the chance to reflect on the big themes and emotions of life."

In this era of constant belt-tightening in the arts, though, Holten insists that artistic work is all about risk. "How many important masterpieces would we be without," he says, "if theatres and composers had not taken risks in the past?"

Even with cut-down ticket prices (the highest is £85) there can be no guarantee that any new piece will sell well; but for Holten that isn't the point. "Today there is a big risk that you are under such pressure to produce a hit that it stifles genuine creativity and artistic intuition with the composers," he says, "but we try to encourage them to be themselves, and to listen to what they want to say. That is quite important in a time where everything is about what the 'user' wants: to allow the arts to be a place where extraordinary people like these composers can be allowed to say to us what they want."

Haas's opera is part of a wider commitment at the ROH to commissioning new works, including ones in seasons ahead from Thomas Adès, George Benjamin and Unsuk Chin. "In 2020," Holten adds, "we will try to really push new opera on the global agenda. We have asked four outstanding composers to give us four new works in one single year, all reflecting on their hopes and fears for our world right now."

"Maybe composers – in the slow art form that opera is, as it takes four or five years to create one – can reflect on tectonic plate shifts in humanity and the world in a different way than the 24/7 news cycle. That is possibly why we need new opera more than ever before."

The world premiere of *Morgen und Abend* is on Friday. Talk about taking a risk.

'Morgen und Abend', Royal Opera House, London WC2 (020 7304 4000) 13 to 28 November