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### LIGETI'S *LE GRAND MACABRE* IN LONDON

On Thursday, October 1<sup>st</sup> 2009, I attended the performance of *Le Grand Macabre*,<sup>1</sup> the only opera by György Ligeti (1923–2006), in the London Coliseum.<sup>2</sup> The ambivalent

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1 The première of the London production was on Thursday, September 17<sup>th</sup> 2009; it opened the season 2009/2010 of this famous English opera house. Originally, this work was premièreed on April 12<sup>th</sup> 1978, at the Royal Opera in Stockholm.

2 Ligeti thought about the possibility of writing the opera *Alice in Wonderland*, but he never realized that project.

atmosphere of the building in which the opera was performed that night hinted irresistibly at the apories of the work itself. Namely, in this glamorous surrounding where every detail is meticulously designed, at a first glance you get the impression that you should have dressed even more elegantly, but, the very next moment, you notice that most of the audience are dressed very *casually*. During the intermission between Scenes Two and Three,<sup>3</sup> champagne and ice cream were served in the foyer of the Coliseum. This bodily pleasure blended well with the hedonistic torrents of Ligeti's opera which he – alluding to the nature of the storms of life – set as antipodes to outbursts of bitterness and pessimism (and the latter, certainly, he did not try to avoid). Such a libretto resulted from Ligeti's cooperation with Michael Meschke; as the basis for the text they used the *Ballade du Grand Macabre* (1934) by Belgian writer Michel de Ghelderode. This Fleming was, as he himself pointed out, inspired by the pictures of Pieter Brueghel the Elder.

One of the primary impressions I got during this production of the English National Opera (ENO), whose original setting is indeed the Coliseum, is that the solid financial basis enabled the directors, scriptwriters, designers and other – equally important – protagonists to dedicate themselves completely to working on their respective segments of sarcastic and apocalyptic “Ligeti-like” operatic spectacle unburdened by thoughts of any kind of economizing, moderation or restraint. The opera was co-produced with the Brussels La Monnaie, the Gran Teatro del Liceu from Barcelona and the Roman Teatro dell'Opera. The production was supported by the 20/20 Group and the Arts Council England's Sustain programme, financed by the National Lottery. It should be noted that this occasion was also the “ENO-debut” of

the Catalonian troupe La Fura dels Baus, which carries out its projects as total theatre.<sup>4</sup> Their approach to the theatrical matter was completely suited to the complex labyrinths of Ligeti's opera work, integrating the enterprises of visual arts, film, theatre, dance and opera. The production was done according to the concept whose authors, Alex Ollé and Valentina Carrasco (from the above mentioned Catalonian troupe), are at the same time the performance directors.

The most impressive stage element, practically the physical base of the performance, was an enormous naked figure made of fibreglass – Claudia<sup>5</sup> – which covered a significant part of the scene. This figure was an impressive metaphor of the domination of body over soul, physical over intellectual. It was a polygon with movable parts, transforming from the giant naked doll into the unpredictable beast in whose jaws the characters rejoiced, hid, fought, lamented or made love. The audience could see the internal organs of this enormous sculpture, occasionally even its whole skeleton, and observe it in a joyful or dark mood, folding or unfolding. The lights<sup>6</sup> and colours alternated in a manifold combinations – over, above, under, beside the central figure – so that little, medium or enormous shadows, as a kind of constant companion, played their specific parts in the system of tragicomic operatic phantasmagoria.

The above mentioned means were actually aimed at a more transparent representation of all the nuances of the action and curious relationships between the inhabitants of Breughelland. In that bizarre country, ruled by impotent rulers, the focus of attention are the sick passions of the

3 The work consists of four scenes.

4 This company began their work some thirty years ago. In the beginning, they were a radical and politically oriented street theatre.

5 The stage designer was Alfons Flores, while the film and video designer was Franc Aleu.

6 The lighting designer was Peter Van Praet.

citizens who seem unable to maintain the usual and relatively normal relationships. This modern Land of Cockaigne reveals a range of grotesque characters, who as a rule reduce their life to just one dimension. They live in various kinds of sadomasochistic relationships, either bodily or mental. Two romantic couples can be seen as paradigms: the young lovers, Amanda and Amando, can only think about the physical relationship and love's pleasures, while the older couple, Mescalina and Astradamors, are in a sadomasochistic relationship. In the latter relationship, Mescalina is dominant and angry because of her man's inadequate potency, for which she punishes him physically. The absurdity of the political organization of the country is shown through the character of its ruler: the Prince Go-Go is completely impotent and immature, and at crucial moments acts like a nervous teenager.

All the characters on the scene, however, are linked by thoughts about death, but these thoughts do not always cause the same amount of panic and alarm. The reactions vary on a large scale: from hypochondriacs who lose their concentration entirely because of fear, through phlegmatic persons, to hedonists, who intensify their pleasurable activities. Death arrives, threatening that the end of the world is near and that everybody will be wiped off the face of the earth. Some fight against dark thoughts by indulging in various sexual activities<sup>7</sup>, some by considering political problems, and others by enjoying food, drink, gambling etc. With a tendency to transform this "soup" of life into the sphere of music,

7 More about this in: Драгана Стојановић-Новичић, „Сексуални аспекти опере *Le Grand Macabre* Ђерђа Лигетија” [„Sexual Aspects of the Opera *Le Grand Macabre* by György Ligeti”], in: Драгана Стојановић-Новичић, *Облаци и звуци савремене музике* [*The Clouds and Sounds of Contemporary Music*], Belgrade, Faculty of Music and Signature, 2007, pp. 115–129.

Ligeti plays with various stylistic “procedures” relishing in abundant quotations of numerous authors from the past. He also refers to his own previous musical procedures, as if looking upon himself from a (musical) distance, and also with sarcasm. Such a musical labyrinth can sustain anything, from allusions to Monteverdi and Rameau, through Beethoven, to segments of popular music. The musical mixture is uproarious, just as the life and happenings in Breughelland.

The singers carried out their difficult tasks, responsibly. Besides performing very complex parts they also had to perform demanding stage movements, which included quick movements, rapid position changes, climbing, descending, jumping, leaping over things, as well as frequent dressing/undressing. The role of Amando was played by Frances Bourne, Amanda by Rebecca Bottone, Necrotzar was played by Pavlo Hunka, Astradamors by Frode Olsen, Mescalina by Susan Bickley, Venus by Susanna Andersson, Piet the Pot by Wolfgang Ablinger-Sperrhacker, and Prince Go-Go by Andrew Watts. The orchestra conducted by Baldur Brönnimann sounded well, but occasionally not strong enough. If this was not the consequence of the acoustic properties of the hall, it is possible that the orchestra part was deliberately subdued to serve as a dark and mystical background to the stage action.

Even after more than thirty years since the première and over twenty five productions in Europe (and one in America), interest in Ligeti's opera has not subsided. Ligeti's approach, which includes different genres – static characters similar to the puppet theatre, stringing up actions like one does in a cartoon, alternating events like in a comic, diversity and eclecticism reminiscent of the carnival – continually inspires directors and opera troupes to come to grips with his “anti-anti-opera” and to find and try to decipher previously neglect-

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ed (or maybe insufficiently used) possibilities for production, libretto, music, as well as its other potentials and labyrinths.

Translated by Goran Kapetanović