

DOCTRINE OF DESPAIR

City Opera presents the New York premiere of *Die Soldaten*,
Bernd Alois Zimmermann's tormented vision of humanity destroying itself

by Jay Reise

Turned and Saw All the Injustices That Are Committed Under the Sun was the title of the last work completed by Bernd Alois Zimmermann before he reportedly sent his wife and children to the country on the weekend of

August 10, 1970, and shot himself in their Cologne apartment. He was fifty-two. The quotation, from Ecclesiastes, could serve as a summary of his opera *Die Soldaten*, written in the early 1960s, as well as Zimmermann's own epitaph.

On October 8, New York City Opera will present the New York premiere of this highly regarded but notoriously difficult-to-produce work, and only the second series of performances in this country. *Die Soldaten* was given its American premiere by Sarah Caldwell and the Opera Company of Boston in 1982, seventeen years after its world premiere in Cologne. According to NYCO's general director, Christopher Keene, who will conduct the five performances, *Die Soldaten* was selected because a significant part of his administration's mission is to bring major modern works to New York, such as *From the House of the Dead* and *Moses und Aron*, both given their New York premieres last year by NYCO. Keene has had *Die Soldaten* on his mind for a number of years, as well as Busoni's *Doktor Faust*. There are also some new American projects in progress, including Leroy Jenkins' *The Mother of Three Sons*.

Pitfalls in *Die Soldaten* include treacherously difficult and complex vocal and instrumental parts, a huge cast, personnel traffic nightmares, simultaneous scenes and a warehouse full of percussion and electronic equipment. One European production is said to have involved 377 vocal and thirty-three orchestral rehearsals. In an American society notoriously tight with its arts budget, these complexities tell the tale



"Human dissoluteness leading to mass destruction": Sarah Caldwell's 1982 staging

of why *Die Soldaten*, in spite of its high artistic reputation, has had to wait so long for its New York premiere. Looking at it from this angle, it is surprising that this complex twentieth-century work comes out of a play written in the eighteenth century.

The libretto was fashioned by the composer from the script of the same name written in 1771 by German playwright Jakob Michael Reinhold Lenz. The play is something of a forerunner of Büchner's *Wozzeck* in that it is antiheroic, antiromantic and light years ahead of its time. It is a sordid but socially powerful story centering on Marie Wesener, daughter of a prosperous merchant. At the beginning of the opera, in the city of Lille — set "yesterday, today, and tomorrow" — Marie is wooed by an amiable, eligible young man named Stolz-ius. But she falls under the spell of a dissolute nobleman in the military named Desportes and, in her desperate attempts to land him, gradually falls into prostitution. By the end, as the city is under atomic attack, she solicits her own father, who fails to recognize her. The opera is ultimately moralistic: Marie's brutalization and decline are presented as symptomatic aspects of human dissoluteness leading to mass destruction.

This description might give the impression that the work is a bit overblown and farfetched, but Zimmermann effectively transforms Lenz' eighteenth-century dark

"comedy" (Lenz' own term) into an Everyperson/Anytime scenario. Zimmermann attempts to create a total theater addressing universal issues, conveyed by the dramatic presentation of simultaneous actions, collages of quotations, mixtures of tonal and atonal musical elements, extramusical sounds and materials, readily audible juxtapositions of varying musical forms, styles and gestures. Not surprisingly, these particular human issues are all negative and cynical — pain and suffering resulting from greed, lust and betrayal. In Zimmermann's world there is no relief, no reprieve, not even fundamental human recognition that can lead to bondings between and among people. Sympathetic orchestral interludes that are present in Berg's bleak universe are long gone here, as well as Berg's humor and irony.

So why, one might think, do I want to see still another work of atonal twentieth-century angst? Because to many, *Die Soldaten* is the great work of alienation and despair, increasingly occupying a place in post-World War II opera similar to that commanded by Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* in contemporary theater or *The Virgin Spring* in modern film.

The main problem in producing *Die Soldaten*, according to Keene, is to simplify the work, presenting the story in a way that the audience can follow what is going on amidst the sea of musical and thematic

Underwritten by CONTINENTAL INSURANCE



**Great Performers
at Lincoln Center
1991-92 Season
presents**

**AT AVERY FISHER HALL:
GREAT SINGERS
WITH
ORCHESTRA**

Four Renowned Vocal Artists in Exclusive
New York Recital Appearances with
the Orchestra of St. Luke's and the
New York City Opera Orchestra

Wednesday, October 30 at 8pm
MIRELLA FRENI, soprano

Sunday, February 16 at 7:30pm
EVA MARTON, soprano

Sunday, May 3 at 7:30pm
APRILE MILLO, soprano
NEIL SHICOFF, tenor

Subscription Prices (3 Concerts):
Orchestra & 1st Tier \$120/**SAVE 20%**
2nd Tier \$90/3rd Tier \$60

MAIL ORDERS TO: Great Performers
Recital Series F, Dept. AFH, Avery Fisher
Hall Box Office, 10 Lincoln Center Plaza,
New York, NY 10023-6972

**AT ALICE TULLY HALL:
THE ART OF THE SONG**

Six Exclusive New York Recitals

Tuesday, October 8 at 8pm
LUCIA POPP, soprano
Arman Guzelemian, piano

Sunday, January 26 at 3pm
TATIANA TROYANOS, mezzo-soprano
BENITA VALENTE, soprano
Warren Jones, piano

Sunday, February 9 at 8pm
THOMAS HAMPSON, baritone

Sunday, February 23 at 8pm
Returning by popular acclaim!
CECILIA BARTOLI, mezzo-soprano
Martin Katz, piano
All-Rossini program in observance
of the composer's 200th birthday

Sunday, March 29 at 3pm
ELLY AMELING, soprano

Sunday, May 3 at 3pm
JERRY HADLEY, tenor

Series Subscription: All Seats \$95
SUBSCRIBERS SAVE MORE THAN 20%
6 CONCERTS FOR THE PRICE OF 5
GET ONE CONCERT FREE!
(Series price if concerts purchased
separately: \$129)

MAIL ORDERS TO: Great Performers
Recital Series S, Dept. ATH, Alice Tully
Hall Box Office, 60 Lincoln Center Plaza,
New York, NY 10023-6588

**CHARGE EITHER SERIES BY PHONE:
CALL CENTERCHARGE
(212) 721-6500**

In Zimmermann's world there is no relief, no reprieve.

complexities, simultaneous actions and events. To Keene and Rhoda Levine, stage director of the NYCO production, Zimmermann's atomic blast seems dated, a product of the '50s and '60s. Levine says this element will be replaced by what she tantalizingly describes as "an image closer to our current situation, in terms of destruction and war, which is correlative for Zimmermann's images." Commenting on the total pessimism of the work, Levine goes on to point out that everyone in the opera has suspect motives, much as in the political arena. The opera concentrates on the strong negative and corrupt forces present in our status quo, forces that often result in murder and suicide.

More clearly demonstrable than with almost any other composer, Zimmermann's artistic vision is, to a large extent, an expression of his own personal story. Born in 1918, Zimmermann spent much of his life in a state of physical and psychological torment. Unfortunately at the ideal age for military service when Hitler's armies marched in 1939, he contracted a skin disease, was taken out of action and hospitalized in 1942. Luckily he was able during this time to study composition with Philipp Jarnach, best known today as the composer who completed Busoni's *Doktor Faust*. In his youth, Zimmermann apparently was afflicted with photopsia, an eye condition characterized by the appearance of sparks and flashes due to retinal irritation. He later wrote an orchestral work, *Photoptosis*, in which striking instrumental timbres and tonal quotations appear as sparks or flashes against an atonal background. Further eye trouble later developed into glaucoma, and a few of Zimmermann's students report that occasionally their composition lessons were held in the dark. Institutionalized several times for depression, an incurable insomniac and a tormented "doubting Thomas" Catholic hounded by the apparent meaninglessness of life, this musical Job poured out his anguish in a remarkable series of morbid, angst-ridden works composed from 1958 to 1970.

The first of these was *Die Soldaten*, originally written in 1957-60. It proved so cumbersome in this first version (apparently requiring twelve stages surrounding the audience, with several scenes playing simultaneously, the audience seated on swivel chairs) that Zimmermann revised the work into the simpler, more manageable version with which opera houses try to cope today. The premiere in Cologne in 1965 was a

great success, catapulting Zimmermann to international fame. This triumph seems to have done little to brighten his outlook, however. Insomnia, failing eyesight and depression led to further breakdowns.

Like the Japanese novelist Yukio Mishima and the American painter Mark Rothko, Zimmermann seems to have created a series of swan-song works that served as steppingstones to his suicide. From the chaotic doomsday of *Die Soldaten*, Zimmermann moved to the orchestral prelude *Photoptosis* (in Zimmermann's mind, a prelude to blindness?) in 1968. These were followed by *Requiem for a Young Poet* in 1969. Although Zimmermann wrote in an article that the Requiem does not refer to a particular young poet, he mentioned three whose texts are prominent in the work — Vladimir Mayakovsky, Konrad Bayer and Sergei Esenin — all of whom committed suicide. Finally, Zimmermann completed the orchestral cantata, *I Turned and Saw All the Injustices That Are Committed Under the Sun*, five days before he took his life.

Die Soldaten, emerging as Zimmermann's masterpiece, often is cited as the most significant opera in German since Berg's *Wozzeck* and *Lulu*. This is due largely to the opera's being accessible both musically and dramatically, despite being uncompromisingly "modern." Other than quotations and superimposed music, the composition is twelve-tone throughout. Somewhat in order to compensate for the lack of articulation points that make tonal music accessible, Zimmermann adopts the device of writing sections of *Die Soldaten* in short instrumental forms, as Berg did in *Wozzeck*. *Die Soldaten*, in its four acts, contains a number of toccatas, ricercars, nocturnes, chaconnes, capriccios and chorales. As in Berg, these are meant to be heard primarily not in their short-form contexts but as internal components of a larger architectural design.

Another element that works surprisingly well in making the opera accessible is the use of the twelve-tone sound as a symbol of the unstable, the neurotic, the angst-ridden. This is not serial music to put one to sleep. Against this atonal backdrop are juxtaposed numerous tonal and modal elements, including a jazz combo in the nightclub scene and in the final scene a Latin chanting of "Our Father Who Art in Heaven" (on a single note, middle D) as Marie solicits her own father. At its most frenetic, the twelve-tone music suggests the chaos of hell unleashed. In the prelude to the opera, for instance, choirs of instruments led by screaming trumpets swarm in a seeming anarchistic frenzy. This chaos is harnessed

by only one key element, which brings everything into focus — the regular, incessant beating of a timpanum on the single note D, which emerges as the tonal center of the piece. It is in this type of compositional construction, where we experience the simple controlling the complex, that Zimmermann's genius for shaping extreme and dramatic musical gestures becomes apparent. Not surprisingly, traditionally hummable tunes are absent, but passages of rich and voluptuous writing are not infrequent. Beyond all its remarkable theatrical and dramatic devices, the music of *Die Soldaten* emerges as powerful and arresting, convincingly capturing the moods and contours of the drama, contributing to create an opera of striking originality and a memorable theatrical experience.

The forces Zimmermann calls for are enormous and are usually approximated in an effort to achieve his desired effects. Both on- and offstage there are over 100 players in the orchestra, along with some seventy-five percussion instruments. In addition, Zimmermann calls for ten groups of loudspeakers, three screens, three film projectors, jazz combo, actors and dancers, plus "eighteen officers and cadets [responsible for] rhythmic speech and control of the 'percussion arsenal' which consists of tableware, tables and chairs." (This last is used in an onstage percussion toccata in the café scene.)

Obviously each opera company must pick and choose from among this barrage of personnel and equipment, based on the limitations of the house. NYCO will not use film, and the scenery will be spare, so as to focus eye and ear on the complex musical and interpersonal elements unfolding onstage. But the orchestral forces will be the largest the company ever has assembled, with a cast consisting entirely of American singers. Keene will follow Zimmermann's suggestion that the gargantuan percussion ensemble, including piano, harpsichord and celesta, be transferred to a rehearsal room, communicate via television and have its sound transmitted electronically to the auditorium. Some thirty-five speakers will be distributed around the New York State Theater to transmit the prerecorded vocal, spoken and musical electronic sounds. The production will have more rehearsals than any other in NYCO history. "In short," says Keene, "we're putting everything we have into it."

MR. REISE, *composer of the opera Rasputin, commissioned and given its premiere by New York City Opera in 1988, teaches composition at the University of Pennsylvania.*

"One of the best opera companies in the world" ESQUIRE MAGAZINE

LYRIC OPERA OF CHICAGO

37th INTERNATIONAL SEASON



Ardis Krainik *General Director*
Bruno Bartoletti *Artistic Director*

MEFISTOFELE

Arrigo Boito
Millo, Johnson; Vozza;
Beccaria; Ramey
Bartoletti/Carsen/Levine/
Schuler/Palumbo/Poulin

THE GAMBLER

Sergei Prokofiev
Lyric Opera Premiere
Greenawald; Palmer, Golden;
Trussel, Duykers; Orth; West
Bartoletti/Ciulei/Boruzescu/
Schuler/Palumbo

ANTONY AND CLEOPATRA

Samuel Barber
New Production
Lyric Opera Premiere
Malfitano; White; Trussel;
Cowan; Halfvarson
Buckley/Moshinsky/
Yeargan/Schuler/
Palumbo/von Heidecke

THE ELIXIR OF LOVE

Gaetano Donizetti
Gasdia, Futral; Hadley;
Corbelli; Desderi
Pappano/Chazalettes/
Santicchi/Schuler/Palumbo

THE MARRIAGE OF FIGARO

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart
McLaughlin/Hall, Lott,
Futral; von Stade, Palmer;
Benelli, Green; Shimell;
Ramey, Kraus, Loup
Davis/Hall/Bury/Schuler/
Tebbutt/Palumbo

MADAMA BUTTERFLY

Giacomo Puccini
Malfitano; Romanò; Leech,
Andreolli; Stilwell;
Szkafarowsky
Gatti/Prince/Dunham/Klotz/
Billington/Liotta/Palumbo

I PURITANI

Vincenzo Bellini
Anderson; Merritt; Coni;
Kavrakos, Perry
Renzetti/Sequi/Lee/
Hall/Schuler/Palumbo

TURANDOT

Giacomo Puccini
New Production
Marton/Savova, Mazzaria/
Malfitano; Bartolini/Beccaria,
Andreolli, de Palma; McGuire;
Kavrakos/Doss
Bartoletti/Farlow/Hockney/
Falconer/Schuler/Palumbo

SEPT '91 thru FEB '92

20 N. Wacker Drive, Chicago, IL 60606 Tel 312.332.2244