

## Archive 2010

22. Juli 2010 , 20:00

### Augustinuskirche Schwäbisch Gmünd, European Church Music Festival Festival

#### The road to Joseph Haydn's Olympus: Konstantia Gourzi on 'Philemon and Baucis'

“The story began in March 1992, when I conducted a work by Joseph Haydn for the first time: the Symphony No.43 in E Flat Major. I felt drawn to the work from the very beginning, and as I studied it I felt singularly exhilarated by its sound. While researching little-known works of Haydn I discovered that some of his operas existed only in fragments, with parts of the music and/or libretto missing.

I was fascinated by Philemon and Baucis, a work rooted in the gods and world of Greek mythology. Because of my Greek origins, I felt particularly close to the subject matter. I felt inspired to bring this opera, initially written for puppets, into the present day, and to discover its theatrical possibilities anew. *Der Götterrat* did not feel at all fanciful to me, but rather terrifyingly real, like a political meeting, during which the elderly pair Philemon and Baucis personify an intense example of love and belief.

Peter Mussbach, the then director of the Berlin Staatsoper, was also immediately enthused by this idea (2002). He commissioned me to complete the missing parts of *Philemon and Baucis* with my own compositions. Getting to grips with Haydn's fragment filled me with a mixture of respect, fear, joy and a desire to marry the past with modernity, making the work performable once again.

One crucial issue for me is the question of tradition: our consciousness of our cultural roots, respect for them, and how they are relevant to the present day. For this reason, Greek history continually inspires me. When I am looking for a connection, a sound bridge between yesterday and today, I am always curious to discover a new whole. In *Philemon and Baucis*, I did not want simply to follow tradition, but rather bring the text together with the sound possibilities of today, sound it against my own realities. I tried to immerse myself in the thoughts and emotions of the words, following the content with feeling and imagination.

Apart from the overture, the music to *Der Götterrat* is missing, but I followed the existing libretto for the new composition. Each of the gods has his own scene, in which he speaks directly. I composed characteristic music for each

god, so each has a personal melody and instrumentation. These scenes are interrupted by animated disputes and dialogues.

I felt very close to the musical and aesthetic sources with these compositional concepts, in some ways at the origin of a theme. *Philemon and Baucis* needs no classical opera stage: it is searching for a musical place.

Haydn's original score is for two oboes, two horns, timpani and strings. I looked at all existing editions and decided to keep the music in its original instrumentation. Secondly, I decided to compose new music for additional instruments, which I "heard" as being necessary: flute, saxophone, trumpet, trombone, percussion, cymbals or zither, harp and piano. The piano is no cembalo substitute, but is also not an accompanying harmonic instrument for the recitative. It should have an improvisatory character, in order to bring a surprise element to the exciting freedom of the music.

In this way I decided to rediscover the old not through historicism, but rather through a specific blend of the most diverse modern elements. I see the opera as a musical text and as a drama, in which singer-actors stand on the stage: not as perfect "voice-machines", but as the bearers of verbal clarity, together with physical presence and emotion.

To give this opera its world premiere in the warehouse of the Staatsoper Berlin, that is to say, in a space other than that of a traditional opera house, gave me a feeling of freedom – the authentic feeling of 'music making' – and great joy in filling a space with music where you would not expect it. Equally, I am happy and grateful to this day that the work could subsequently be played in the railway museum in Budapest in the summer of 2009. The exceptional venue lent a completely new dimension to the whole. For some time now, I have been thinking intensely about the phenomenon of space. In Budapest, the special room inspired me to light it up with sound, and for the second part – the opera *Philemon and Baucis* itself – I found a type of second musical level for a small ensemble to compose for, that supports the intimacy of the plot in this part.

After the performances in Budapest, the Europäische Kirchenmusik Schwäbisch Gmünd festival approached me to perform the opera as part of their 'Old and New' theme. To be able to use the Augustinuskirche as the venue confirmed again my desire to integrate the space into the entire conception in a fundamental way, to regard it in sonic terms and create from it. No performance space is the same and this great range of possibilities finally gave me the idea of setting *Philemon and Baucis* on further journeys.

I see and realise it as a 'mobile opera', a long-term experiment, in order to explore music under special circumstances. Rooms that usually are used for

completely different reasons, places of prayer and the gods, are the places in which the fragmentary *Philemon and Baucis* can come to life and operate - with a fantastically diverse sound, space and theatrical spectrum.