

RE ORSO

LEGENDE MUSICALE by Marco Stroppa for 4 singers, 4 acteurs, ensemble, électronique, spatialisation et totem acoustique.

Livret de Catherine Ailloud-Nicolas et Giordano Ferrari d'après Re Orso, fable d'Arrigo Boito

SYNOPSIS

Exordium

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Zuzzurellone (big child)

A two-part legend will be told and any resemblance to persons living or dead is purely coincidental.

Part One: Living Bear

Scene 1: Ruffled ancient stories (rock passacaglia with verve)

At the court of Crete before the year 1000, King Bear carries on a reign of terror. He commits murder in public and forces his courtiers to sing of his paradoxical glory: his riches, his heinous crimes, his concupiscence.

Scene 2: Spectrum (pompous, uninhibited)

But the following night a mysterious voice haunts him. Is it the voice of the woman he killed? Did she survive his murder? Is it the voice of conscience which, like a worm, gnaws at King Bear?

Scene 3: Stone serenade (zany)

To escape his nightmares, he wants to marry Oliba, a young foreign woman he has abducted. Petrified, she refuses to give herself to him and he attempts to rape her with the help of his henchmen.

Scene 4: Dialectical duel (muddled) and tango larva (crumbled)

The voice is embodied. The woman or her ghost reappears, it is the Worm. A dialectical duel begins with the King that turns into a duet. The King acknowledges his soul's ambivalence.

Scene 5: Nuptials and songs (presumptuous) and historical interlude (festive, chaotic)

The following day is the wedding feast of the King and Oliba. A Trouvère sings to the accompaniment of his instrumental counterpart, a robotized piano. Papiol, the King's jester is requested to perform tricks. The Worm tells Oliba of the hidden side of this strange court. Then the Trouvère imprudently sings his love for Oliba. King Bear unleashes his violence. He kills the Trouvère, Oliba and the Worm. He summons his horrified court to an orgy of violence and blasphemy.

Part Two: Dead Bear

Scene 1: Confession (harsh, obsolete)

King Bear, now dying, is facing his confessor. He offers him money in exchange for the absolution for his crimes. But his confession turns into a nightmare. The dead from Part One reappear to perform the King's misdeeds in front of him. The Worm recounts his journey to find King Bear.

Scene 2: Litany, great messy tutti (great pandemonium, like a lame jig)

All assemble in a devilish litany that accompanies the King's death, a death without redemption.

Scene 3: Tombstone, coffin, shroud (serene, serious, simple, confident)

The Worm, who has become the voice of the people, the voice of the poet, celebrates his victory over the tyrant.

Catherine Ailloud-Nicolas

TO READ BEFORE THE SHOW

From its foundation in 1714 until its merging with the Opéra de Paris in 1939, the Opéra Comique was the second French operatic stage in terms of budget. As for the number of new productions, it ranked first during that time with an average of ten titles per season – twice as much as the Paris Opéra. Unlike the latter, the Salle Favart was open every night until the 1930s and, because of its tight budget, had to secure the loyalty of its patrons by renewing its titles. As host to new authors and composers, it was the spearhead of the French school of performing, a hub of artistic inventiveness and proposal, while remaining a repertory theater with a marked identity that owed much to its genre, which combined spoken comedy and musical expressiveness.

From 1939 to 1989, the Salle Favart continued to feature new productions such as those by Francis Poulenc within the framework of the Réunion des Théâtres Lyriques Nationaux and then of the Théâtre National de l'Opéra. From 1990 to 2006, before it regained its status as a national theater lost in 1989, new productions were scarce, not as stage proposals but rather as original works commissioned to contemporary composers. On becoming director of the Opéra Comique in September 2007, Jérôme Deschamps wished to renew the vitality of the genre and the purpose of the house. The economic viability and the development in the 20th century of a highly selective international repertoire make it impossible today to schedule a new production together with two or three revivals from the repertoire as in times past.

Yet by commissioning in 2007 to composers working in France with a passion for drama, the Opéra Comique became a creative stage again in 2010. After a revival of *Roméo & Juliette* by Pascal Dusapin in 2008, the Salle Favart hosted the Parisian opening of *Lady Sarashina* by Peter Eötvös in 2009, the world premiere of *Les Boulingrin* by Georges Aperghis, and the first Paris performance of *Cachafaz* by Oscar Strasnoy.

Commissioned to Marco Stroppa in 2008 and initially due in June 2011, the world premiere of *Re Orso* was postponed until May 2012 to give the composer enough time to complete his opera. Such flexibility prevailed as long as theaters relied upon their repertoire – *Pelléas et Mélisande* was thus completed three months prior to its premiere and the interludes were composed only a few days ahead. In 2010-2011 the dramaturgy of *Re Orso* was thoroughly reformulated in close collaboration with director Richard Brunel and the two playwrights Catherine Ailloud-Nicolas and Giordano Ferrari.

The libretto results from the adaptation, for today's music and stage, of an Italian dramatic poem by Arrigo Boito – Verdi's famous librettist and a composer-playwright like Wagner – which was meant to be read only and published as several versions between 1864 and 1902. Written in heterometric verse and structured like a musical piece, Boito's *Re Orso* is composed of two parts: *Orso vivo* (Living Bear) and *Orso morto* (Dead Bear).

A twofold piece, Marco Stroppa's *Re Orso* consists of a first part chiefly made of instrumental music completed in March 2012, and an electronic second part devised at IRCAM, perfected in April 2012 after years of research with computer programs and systems. Through amplification of the vocalists and actors throughout the performance and the use of systems that transform their voices or produce synthetic voices and imaginary sounds, there is no break between the two musical languages, but rather a play of continuity, combination and contrasts as part and parcel of the dramaturgy.

King Bear, who gave his name to the opera, exterminates his subjects and believes he is invincible and immortal. In due time, he is confronted with the ultimate power of a worm embodied – for show and allegorically – by a woman belonging to a people persecuted for too long. Marco Stroppa's musical legend questions power in the spirit of *opéra bouffe* but also of Victor Hugo's drama and especially Shakespeare's, which was well-known to Boito as he had translated it or

adapted it for opera. It examines the effects of power on the relationship to reality and truth in those who exercise it or suffer from it: the tyrant's doubts, the compromises around him and the fascination he exerts over his victims.

Inspired by Boito's verse, *Re Orso* is Marco Stroppa's first opera. Familiar with the operatic repertoire, he chose to confront his musical world to the features of the genre, attending to the creation of the characters and the implementation of a dynamic dramaturgy. Vocalism, which highlights lyric voices, shapes the instrumental and electronic compositions alike. The scenography mobilizes the instrumentalists of the Ensemble InterContemporain, their music director Susanna Mälkki and even a robotized piano, as the gloomy counterpart of a trouvère, which dies with him on stage. The electronics follow the conductor's tempo like the other instruments. The spatialization device takes advantage of the frontal relationship between the audience and the performance owing to the architecture of the Salle Favart before taking hold of the stage in the final scene. Thus, drama truly gives substance to the musical utterance and the sonic course of the fable.

Re Orso results from the meeting, across one century, of an artist of yesterday, Arrigo Boito, who strongly wished for the revitalization of opera, and an artist of today, Marco Stroppa, who addresses this issue with a view and means of expression of his time based on electronics. The Opéra Comique firmly supports this kind of confrontation, especially when the musical legend it brings forth appears as a true political fable.