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**Cricket, myths and magic by Christopher Fox**

We live in an age when fiction with a child's eye perspective regularly dominates the best seller lists. The sales figures for the grand vision of Philip Pullman's *Dark Materials*, the rather more wooden wizardry of Harry Potter, and curious incidents with dogs in the night-time, all demonstrate the universal appeal of narrative clarity and a wondering view of the world, while in the Netherlands the stories of Toon Tellegen, on which Richard Ayres has based his new opera, *The Cricket Recovers*, enjoy a similar success. All these fictions present a world contingent upon, but subtly different from, that of our everyday lives. In this parallel territory, all sorts of attractive impossibilities become real. Moral absolutes matter: the distinction between good and bad is fundamental and ultimate retribution is always just. Time and the natural world are also magically flexible: one may live for ever, or temporarily adopt other shapes; animals can talk, acquire neuroses, live heroically.

The opera house provides us with another portal into this other reality. Indeed it could be argued that no other western art form has devoted itself so tenaciously to myth and fable. Monteverdi and his operatic successors in the 17<sup>th</sup> century instinctively turned to the legends of classical antiquity for subjects for their new medium, the vocal and theatrical spectacle of 18<sup>th</sup> century *opera seria* maintained this tradition and the grandest operatic undertaking of all, Wagner's *Ring* cycle, simply relocated its supernatural settings to more northerly latitudes.

Even *Figaro*, *Carmen* and *Wozzeck*, each with their particular claim to social realism, take us over the border into fantasy the moment the characters begin to sing, into what Richard Ayres describes as 'the double world of opera, balanced on the edge between the world of the story and the illusion of the show'. We may be watching individuals who are ostensibly playing out the dynamic emergence of the bourgeoisie, or the politics of race, class and oppression, but what we hear are sublimely elevated voices, rising in patterns of extraordinary virtuosity and complexity. Nothing that the words can tell us will ever match the overwhelming impact of these voices and their instrumental support. As Brecht said, 'Opera's unreasonable side comes from the fact that there are rational elements employed there, that a certain materiality and a certain realism are pursued there, whereas the music nullifies all of that... The music makes the reality vague and unreal'.

Little surprise then that most opera composers turn instinctively to the fantastic for their dramatic frameworks; in 1600 Monteverdi sent Orfeo to the netherworld to test the relative power of love and death and in so doing to take a faltering step towards an understanding of humanity, in 2005 Richard Ayres despatches an elephant on a quest for climbable trees and his own version of self-knowledge. In between, as most art forms turned from the fabulous towards the more realistic, opera too had its flirtation with more mundane subjects, but since the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century other-worldly matters have been in the ascendant. Sometimes these are antique tales of vengeance (*Salome*, *Oedipus*) sometimes surreal teaching stories (*The Rake's Progress*, *Punch and Judy*) sometimes intimately ghostly (*The Turn of the Screw*), sometimes quasi-scientific enigmas (*Einstein on the Beach*).

Very often, however, the source material is so-called children's literature - as I suggested earlier, the true home of myth and fairytale for well over a century now. In basing his new opera, *The Cricket Recovers*, on the short stories of Toon Tellegen, a writer whose work has been delighting children on the continent for over a decade now, Richard Ayres is continuing in a tradition which dates back at least as far as Humperdinck's 1893 hugely successful adaptation of the Brothers Grimm in his opera *Hansel and Gretel*. Other notable antecedents include the inspired collaboration between Colette and Ravel which resulted in their 'lyric fantasy' *L'Enfant et les Sortilèges* (1920-5) and the miniaturised brilliance of Oliver Knussen's settings of Maurice Sendak in *Where the Wild Things Are* (1979-83) and *Higglety Pigglety Pop!* (1984-90). More recently, Helmut Lachenmann has extended the canon with his hauntingly beautiful *Das Mädchen mit den Schwefelhölzern* (1999/2000), in which Hans

Christian Anderson's *Little match girl* confronts Leonardo da Vinci and the German reorrist Gudrun Enslin.

At the heart of each of the tales on which these operas are based is an unflinching confrontation with some of the most fundamental aspects of being human: dealing with the consequences of our actions and desires, recognising that with individuality comes the fear of being alone in the world. Transported into the world of the opera house they inevitably lose the intimacy of private storytelling, but in this strange new setting, the place which Catherine Clément describes as being charged with all our 'unformulated dreams and secret passions', they gain in emotional intensity, wrapped in the textures and forms of musical continuity. Indeed it is the very formal artifice of the medium which gives these operas their expressive power. In *L'Enfant et les Sortilèges*, for example, it is the tension between the formal elegance of a succession of wittily realised character pieces – pentatonic Chinoiserie for the tea-cup, arithmetic polkas and feline waltzes – and the growing isolation of the child at the heart of the drama which makes the final scenes of reconciliation so wonderfully poignant.

Like *L'Enfant et les Sortilèges*, Richard Ayres's *The Cricket Recovers* is also centred on a group of characters with generic identities – a cricket, an ant, a sparrow, a squirrel – whose actions we follow through a series of eighteen sharply etched scenes. Like Ravel, Ayres wants us to be aware that we are the audience for a very particular form of entertainment and yet also conscious that there are real psychological truths to be discovered from the plight of these strange creatures. Like *L'Enfant et les Sortilèges*, *The Cricket Recovers* is also very evidently a number opera. When Ayres showed me the then nearly finished opera earlier this year I pointed out the recurrent use in *The Cricket Recovers* of brief summative codas rounding off the action of scenes and Ayres suggested that this was a device to remind us of the musical and dramatic constructs within which he has placed Tellegen's creatures. There are other formal devices too: the cycle of the seasons, the diurnal path from sunrise to sunset, changes in the weather; all overlay and shape the narrative which Ayres and his librettist, Rozalie Hirs, have created from Tellegen's originals.

Other operatic precedents have also made their mark on *The Cricket Recovers*, as Ayres acknowledged when we talked about his path towards operatic enlightenment. The composers Ayres cited are predominantly those who also worked at this same nexus of the formal, the mythic and the real. He praised Purcell, for example, for the telling economy with which he evokes 'amazing things in such short scenes', particularly in *Dido and Aeneas* and the semi-opera *King Arthur*, and this ability to sketch in changes in temperament or temperature has Ayresian equivalents in the new work. Janáček is another important influence, as he has been for Ayres for many years now; in *The Cricket Recovers* Ayres acknowledges a debt to Janáček for the way in which he uses instruments 'not to heighten emotion but to represent the emotional truth of the characters'.

*The Cricket Recovers* may be the most recent addition to a dramatic lineage which reaches back to the beginnings of opera itself, as well as connecting with a contemporary passion for storytelling which crosses the boundaries between the worlds of children and adults, but I suspect Ayres's music and the Quay Brothers' scenic realisation will offer us more than a few surprises. Childishly simple, or unnervingly direct? As with all Ayres's work, as with so many of the most compelling stories in literature or in the opera house, the answer is dangerously, exhilaratingly uncertain.

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