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Thomas Adès, *The Exterminating Angel*, Haus für Mozart, Salzburg

The Salzburg Festival publicity office knew that it had a major musical event on its hands. Before the premiere of Thomas Adès's *The Exterminating Angel* on 28 July 2016, they held a reception for the world's press on a rooftop balcony overlooking the old town (which, in the name of investigative journalism, your intrepid *Tempo* correspondent attended). The procession from such genteel surroundings and through the bustling Hofstallgasse into the auditorium, in which bells were already chiming in the orchestral pit and sheep were standing patiently on stage, enacted one of the central themes of the opera: that of the passage from bourgeois respectability (and, let's be frank, privilege) into a world that is less predictable, less explicable.

The opera, commissioned jointly by the Salzburg Music Festival, the Royal Opera Covent Garden, the Metropolitan Opera New York and the Royal Danish Opera, was adapted by Adès and librettist Tom Cairns from Luis Buñuel's 1962 film *El ángel exterminador* and I compare the opera and film in my article, 'Thomas Adès's *The Exterminating Angel*', elsewhere in this issue. The basic scenario – that the well-to-do guests at a party are unable to leave – has few precedents in the operatic literature. Fiona Maddocks's *Observer* review pointed out a distant kinship with Puccini's *Gianni Schicchi*,¹ though the requirement for Adès's fifteen principals to be on stage for almost the entire two-hour duration of the film far outstrips Puccini's demands. Judith Belfkih, in the *Wiener Zeitung*, turned to theatrical precedent, describing *The Exterminating Angel* as a 'Kammerspiel', thus cleverly evoking both the intricacy of Adès's ensemble writing as well as the early twentieth-century Germanic movement in cinema and (particularly) film that focused on the psychological portraits of the middle classes.² Adès achieves the latter by replacing Buñuel's minimal score (no more than a 'Te Deum' at the start and end of the film and a diegetic piano performance) with a darker running commentary to the unfolding drama. The music acts as a connecting thread, filling the space created by the absence of a rational explanation for the events enacted on stage with its own logic. In this sense, *The Exterminating Angel* is a perfect vehicle for the meeting of symphonism and absurdity that characterises Adès's understanding of opera,³ enabling it to carve out an identity of its own, so that it stands independently from the film as a powerful meditation on the (deadly) consequences of mindless ritualised behaviour and loss of the will to act.

Much of the talk prior to the opera was about the large cast, who, by all accounts, had bonded closely during the intensive rehearsal period. And what a cast it was: the exceptional talents on display included alumni from various productions of Adès's *The Tempest* (Audrey Luna, Christine Rice, Iestyn Davies) as well as – amongst others – Amanda Echalaz, Anne Sofie von Otter, Sally Matthews, Charles Workman, Thomas Allen and John Tomlinson. Not only was the singing of Adès's taxing vocal writing of the highest standard, but the cast responded well to Cairns's complex production; the eye was frequently led from the active singers to some detail happening between other guests, as when Sten Byriell's dying exhortations (as the unfortunate Senor Russell) were counterpointed visually, and comically, by the sight of guests on the other side of the stage filing in and out of a makeshift toilet in a closet.

The orchestra is imaginatively deployed, with prominent roles for the piano and Ondes Martenot (played with typical virtuosity by Cynthia Millar). The music frequently taps into the vein of highly atmospheric eeriness that Adès made his own in earlier works such as *America* (1999) and,

¹ Fiona Maddocks, 'A turning point for Adès, and opera', *The Observer* (31 July 2016).

² Judith Belfkih, 'Gefangene der Freiheit', *Wiener Zeitung* (29 July 2016).

³ See Adès's numerous comments on opera in Thomas Adès and Tom Service, *Thomas Adès: Full of Noises* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2012).

particularly, *Totentanz* (2013). The macabre aspects of the music were well matched by a series of compelling theatrical gestures in the third act, from Tal Yarden's video projection of a disembodied hand, to the sinister emergence from a cabinet of, and duet between, Sophie Bevan and Ed Lyon's Beatriz and Eduardo, prior to their suicide.

The denouement of the opera expands the role that the diegetic music plays in the film: it is only through Audrey Luna's character of Leticia singing her long-delayed aria that the guests are released. Her words are adapted by Adès from the twelfth-century poet Yehuda Halevi, and speak of the longing to return from exile; they mirror a similar theme found in added material given to Christine Rice's Blanca. The music of Leticia's aria, though diatonic, is restless: it is about the search for, rather than the finding of, peace; about becoming rather than being. The same is true of the close of the opera: against a similar plea for deliverance, taken from the Requiem mass, the guests (as well as the chorus that had been stationed outside of the room) find themselves trapped on the opera stage, the music repeating in a potentially endless loop. Denied a traditional close (and requiring a blackout and sudden cut-off to enable some manner of ending), the on-stage dilemma is projected out into the audience, as if to remind us that we, too, are bound up in its (social) drama, and caught in an endless tension between action and inaction. An extended standing ovation for the composer and cast indicate that social conventions had been restored, though perhaps not without some degree of self awareness, after the compelling critique of such typical behavioural responses to which the audience had been subjected for the previous two hours.