



Opera at the Festival House in 2014

Biting satire on the Viennese milieu – HK Gruber's setting of Horváth's play *Tales from the Vienna Woods*

Tales from the Vienna Woods is the title of a charming waltz by Johann Strauss (the Younger). The title was borrowed by the Austro-Hungarian writer Ödön von Horváth for what became his best known and often filmed play which was premiered at the Deutsches Theater, Berlin, in 1931. A bitter satire about the mendacity and brutality of the petite-bourgeoisie, ironically named after the forested highlands near the Austrian capital that are so idealised in the waltz. In the play, Viennese *Gemütlichkeit* becomes a hollow phrase; the tragic, brutal story of the sweet girl Marianne and the deeply conventional butcher Oskar reflects the hardships and anxieties of the late 1920s during the global economic crisis.

Can the play be turned into an opera? Horváth himself thought a suitable composer would be Kurt Weill, who had collaborated with Bertolt Brecht on the great success *The Threepenny Opera*. But the project did not get off the ground. Today there is probably no better candidate than HK (Heinz Karl) Gruber for the job of giving the play musical form. The Vienna-born composer, conductor, singer and actor, who celebrates his 70th birthday this year, has mixed very disparate musical styles before – Viennese music, cabaret and Sprechgesang – in his "pandemonium for orchestra" *Franckenstein!!* which has been acclaimed around the world and was performed at the Bregenz Festival in 2012.

Now he has crafted *Tales from the Vienna Woods* into a piece of music theatre. The result will be staged at Bregenz in 2014. The idea actually came from the stage director and librettist Michael Sturminger, who will also direct the production. He has worked with HK Gruber before – on the opera *Der Herr Nordwind* at Zurich Opera in 2005.

At first the composer was put off by the great popularity of the play. But Sturminger produced a collage of Horváth's text which finally convinced him. "For me, *Tales from the Vienna Woods* with its fierce, precisely targeted, trenchant social criticism is in fact an absolutely timeless work of truly



Brechtian calibre," Gruber says. Brecht once described Horváth's play as an "anti Viennese folk-play". In composing the opera, Gruber therefore wants to steer clear of crude Viennese clichés. He is more interested in modelling the characters and in musical alienation effects.

For artistic director David Pountney, who is leaving the Bregenz Festival in 2014, this world premiere is a final highlight of his era: *Tales from the Vienna Woods* is the fifth significant Bregenz premiere of recent years. Pountney describes Ödön von Horváth's play as a "razor-sharp analysis of the residents of the rougher part of Vienna and a merciless exposure of the vanity, corruption and ultimately the cruelty of those people". But the story is told, nevertheless, in a tone that is "bitter and tender" at the same. And that is what's surprising.

The atmosphere "shortly before Austria's embrace of fascism" is always palpable, Pountney says. And the Nazi press in the Weimar Republic was quick to attack Horváth's play. When the National Socialists seized power in 1933, the writer's works were banned; and after the Anschluss of Austria in 1938 Horváth fled to Paris. Even the first post-war production, at the Vienna Volkstheater in 1948, caused a scandal. The audience was incensed by the exposure of their beloved Viennese milieu. "It is a presumption to call this ghoulissh spectacle of halfwits and criminals a folk-play," one critic huffed.

This tightrope walk is all the more fascinating for us today. Pountney says, "A characteristic of the play is that its humanity and humour leave the listeners just enough space for them to be amused – before the knife cuts into the flesh with subtle and charming precision". People who visit the Bregenz Festival can therefore look forward to an exciting premiere from the feather of the composer HK Gruber, affectionately known to his fans as Nali.

The 2014 Bregenz Festival runs from 23 July to 25 August 2014. For tickets and information, call +43 (0)5574 407-6 or visit www.bregenzfestspiele.com.