



NATIONAL
CENTRE FOR
CULTURE
POLAND

Krzysztof Penderecki: *The Black Mask* opera in one act

22 November (Friday) ——— 7.00 pm

Teatr Wielki – Polish National Opera
Moniuszko Auditorium
1 Teatralny Square

Based on a play by Gerhart Hauptmann, *The Black Mask* by Penderecki is set in the house of a mayor of a seventeenth-century Silesian town during a party where the invited guests, representatives of various faiths and states, confront their own secrets and fears. The composer creates a dense, tension-filled sound and musical structure; by using an extensive orchestra, choir and off-stage ensembles, he builds the suggestive ambience of the coming apocalypse. Created in 1986, this piece is a staple of contemporary opera theatre, constantly open to new interpretations.

Concert programme

Krzysztof Penderecki (1933–2020)

The Black Mask (1986)

Opera in one act

libretto: Harry Kupfer,
Krzysztof Penderecki

Performers:

Wojciech Parchem

Silvanus Schuller

Natalia Rubiś

Benigna

Katarzyna Drelich

Arabella

Elżbieta Wróblewska

Rosa Sacchi

Szymon Rona

Jedidja Potter

Wojciech Gierlach

François Torteбат

Adrianna Ferfecka

Daga

Krzysztof Szumański

Löwel Perl

Dariusz Machej

Plebanus Wendt

Mateusz Zajdel

Hadank

Remigiusz Łukomski

Count Ebbo Hüttenwächter

Magdalena Pluta

Countess Laura Hüttenwächter

Piotr Maciejowski

Schedel

Bassem Akiki

conductor

David Pountney

director

Raimund Bauer

stage design

Marie-Jeanne Lecca

costume design

David Haneke

projections

Fabrice Kebour

lighting design

Ran Arthur Braun

stunt coordinator

Frédéric Matona

pyrotechnics

Agnieszka Franków-Żelazny

preparation of the choir

Choir and Orchestra of the Teatr Wielki – Polish National Opera



For more information on the performers please visit:

Krzysztof Penderecki: *The Black Mask*

The libretto for Penderecki's third opera – *The Black Mask* – was modelled on Gerhart Hauptmann's play of the same title, which premiered in 1929 at the Burgtheater in Vienna.



Adam Kumiś

Krzysztof Penderecki

The composer assumed that this particular drama/morality play would be excellent material to carry out the commission of the famous Salzburg Festival (Salzburger Festspiele) to write an opera. He began with abridging and modifying the ending of Hauptmann's text – a very complex story, full of almost surreal moments.

Although each attempt to summarise it results in unavoidable simplification, let us try to present such. In February 1662,

when the echoes of the Thirty Years' War have not died yet, Silvanus Schuller, rich mayor of Bolkenhain (today's Bolków), a small town in Lower Silesia, throws a feast at his house in honour of his beloved wife Benigna. In this seemingly peaceful environment, thirteen very different people meet. The guests include adherents of different religions and worldviews, representatives of various nationalities and social states (for example, a Jansenist servant, a Huguenot gardener, a Catholic abbot, a Protestant pastor, a Jewish merchant, municipal councillors), whose lives turn out to be inextricably linked.

As the participants of the feast engage in conversations and disputes, we learn their deeply hidden secrets, memories, fears and hallucinations. The atmosphere thickens, more and more soaked with a sense of fragility of the human condition and a hunch of inevitable destruction. All the characters are drawn into – as Penderecki himself put it – 'a great Baroque dance of death', abounding in understated topics. The key role is played by the mysterious figure of Johnson, in which – as the composer used to say – 'one can [...] see an Avenging Angel – this is how I read it: a fugitive slave takes revenge on people involved in human trafficking. At one point, we do not know whether the black mask is the Black Death or Johnson dressed in a carnival costume.' It is the 'black mask' that 'takes everyone to the abyss in a dance procession'¹ at the end. All the protagonists of this story die – only Löwel Perl, 'the Jew, the eternal wanderer', manages to escape.

Given that Hauptmann provided many instructions on the acoustic background for the stage action, it must be admitted that the task that Penderecki undertook was both very attractive and difficult. After all, it was not about 'ordinary' illustrative music for dramatic theatre, but about an original

musical and literary form. Disturbing knocks and murmurs, uproar, church chimes, organ sounds, bell sounds, dance music, religious hymns, drinking songs – such constituents of the drama's soundscape were absorbed by the composer and processed as part of his original musical language. *The Black Mask* features a constant 'chorus', which is 'the ecstatic carnival procession passing in front of the house', while from behind the stage, we can hear such sounds as 'Glockenspiel, carnival music, *Dies irae* motif and music at home in the gallery'.²

The opera is built not only by solos, but above all by tense dialogues and ensembles with contrapuntally intertwined vocal lines, supported by an extensive orchestra. There are also two off-stage ensembles – one composed of Renaissance instruments and the other of brass instruments and percussion. Together with the choir, this all-powerful apparatus allowed Penderecki to include various elements into the music of *The Black Mask*, for example, quotations from early music (several Gregorian chant melodies and a piece by a Silesian lutenist from the seventeenth century, Esaias Reusner) and self-quotations from his previous works (*Polish Requiem*, *Dies irae*, *Te Deum*).

The coexisting styles both clash and correlate with each other. On the one hand, we are dealing with 'Neo-Romantic' means already firmly established in Penderecki's musical language, and on the other – with 'modern' ones, those that were characteristic of the composer's oeuvre from the early 1960s. Consequently, glissandi and clusters significantly help in creating tension and building the mood of the composition; at the same time, the form-generating factor in *The Black Mask* is rhythm. The phrases and textures woven from it interact with the peculiar harmony resulting from the system created specifically for this opera. Penderecki's complex and dense music is characterised by a variety of means while being very suggestive in accompanying the stage reality. It draws the listener into the whirlwind of the unfolding apocalypse, into a world without a shred of hope for salvation, into which the words of consolation struggle through the orchestral noise: *Oro supplex et acclinis, / Cor contritum quasi cinis: / Gere curam mei finis* (Low I kneel, with heart's submission; / See, like ashes my contrition! / Help me in my last condition!).³ At the same time, thanks to this music, the meaning and message of the text can also be read from a contemporary perspective.

Iwona Lindstedt

¹ Krzysztof Penderecki o "Czarnej masce", in: Krzysztof Penderecki: *Czarna maska*, programme of the Polish premiere of the opera on 25 October 1987 at the Grand Theatre in Poznań, p. 14.

² Ibidem, p. 20.

³ *The New English Hymnal*, Norwich 1986, <https://hymnary.org/hymn/NEH1985/524> (accessed 19.10.2024).