

And Death Shall Have One Dominion

New York  
Avery Fisher Hall, Lincoln Centre  
02/20/2009 -

**Luigi Dallapiccola: *Volo di Notte* (Night Flight) – *Il Prigioniero* (The Prisoner)**

*Volo di Notte*: Richard Zeller (Rivi re), Peter Tantsits (Pellerin), Lori Phillips (Mrs. Fabien), Scott Williamson (Radio-telegrapher), Charles Sprawls (Robinson), Peter van Derick (Leroux), Matt Kreger, Joseph Palarca, Rod Gomez Raymond Diaz (Four Employees), Leslie Hochman (Invisible Voice)

*Il Prigioniero*: David Pittman-Jennings (The Prisoner), Donald Kaasch (The Jailer/Grand Inquisitor), Lori Phillips (The Mother), Matt Kreger, Joseph Palarca (Two Priests)  
Concert Chorale of New York, James Bagwell (Director), American Symphony Orchestra, Leon Botstein (Music Director and Conductor)



Lori Phillips (  American Symphony Orchestra)

I spent four hours this week experiencing murders, torture and fatal accidents in Italy this week. Yet my heart and mind are soaring higher than they have any right to soar.

The first two hours were with *Gomorra*, one of the most stunning crime films ever made, and not a subject of this column. Last night I heard two operas by one of Italy's supreme composers, certainly the most profound of the 20th Century, Luigi Dallapiccola. And that deserves more than a few hundred humdrum words. It deserves a lifetime.

Initially it would seem daunting attending a pair of 12-tone chamber operas, one of them totally unknown, the other heard on recording. But Leon Botstein and the American Symphony

Orchestra have carried on the heritage of Leopold Stokowski literally, presenting works which would never find their way into the mainstream repertory. Sometimes their offering is an ephemeral rarity. With Dallapiccola, they succeeded to an everlasting success.

Dallapiccola himself was a man who lived his life as if a character in one of his operas. His family was imprisoned after the First World War for political reasons. During the Fascist regime of Mussolini, Dallapiccola, married to a Jewish woman but unable to leave Italy because he had to care for his dying mother, stayed in Florence, where each day was torture for him, since he never knew when he would be arrested. During that time, he discovered atonalism, and taking as credo Busoni's words—"In creation, the new is always implicit"—he turned to serialism.

These two works, though, for which he wrote the librettos, have a dramatic relativity and a musical originality which far transcends mere serial theory.

*Night Flight*, based on a story by Saint-Exupéry, tells of an airline operator in South America who tries to bring three mail-planes down safely. Two of them make it, but one is doomed. Yet the doom is coated with hope—the operative word. As the pilot speaks to the Radio-telegrapher, who brings the words to us, he is about to die but sees light and heads toward this "safe harbor" The light, though, is the light of stars for the disoriented pilot, and he flies up to his fate.

*The Prisoner* is based on a tale of the Inquisition, where the eponymous character (in the original story, a rabbi, but here a fighter for Flemish independence) sees a chance to escape thanks to a supposedly friendly jailer. He goes through tunnel after tunnel, and then rises—like the pilot—to the air. "Alleluja!" he says, "The starlight. The heavens!". He too is doomed, for the friendly "jailer" is actually the Head Inquisitor, who has punished his man with false hope.

Not the doomed pilot but the airline operator who insists on the dangerous flight, is the existential character who tries to rule the universe, and fails. The Prisoner equally sees hope in ruling his own destiny, and also fails.

Yet both of them, like Camus' existential man, have no choice but to challenge death, as did Dallapiccola himself during the Second World War.

Musically, I had brought with me both scores, which, while enlightening, was misleading, since they were vocal-piano scores, and Dallapiccola had the Italian sense of orchestration. In his day, he was revolutionary here, bringing together vibraphones, xylophones, an organ, choruses, as well as a full palette of orchestral colors.

And while his tone-rows are apparent, the works bear fitting resemblance to contemporary operas which weren't bound to any theory. *The Prisoner*, with its monologues and "stations of the cross" on the stage, is closest to Bartók's *Bluebeard* (even to the major character who tries to escape his fate), though the travels through the catacombs resembles almost literally

Schoenberg's *Survivor From Warsaw*, written about the same time. *Night Flight*, from the beginning orchestra to the end, resembles above all, Puccini's *Tabarro*, with its relentless concision and brutality.

Yet they are both original, both striking, both psychologically shattering operas.

While the voices were uniformly fine, dramatic character was limited to *The Prisoner*. *Night Flight*, by structure itself had almost all disembodied voices. The lead character of the latter, Richard Zeller, is a bass-baritone of great power and linguistic lucidity (the Italian being always clear), his character turning from corporate manipulator to virtual executioner. Scott Williamson as the Radio-telegrapher, balancing precariously between the objective Medium and the Messenger of Death.

The most human person was Lori Phillips, the wife of the doomed pilot, who argues hopelessly with Riviere. "I am a woman, and I love. You are a man, you follow an idea," she sings in an impassioned duet, and one feels for her.

*The Prisoner* has three defined characters. It would be degrading to speak of David Pittman-Jennings, the eponymous prisoner, as having a "rich" baritone. It was the character itself, illusional with his mother, hopeful and frightened by himself, elated toward the end, and in the final questioning soft words, "And freedom?" back to illusion.

The Jailer, is the Judas incarnate. His first word, "Brother" over three chromatic notes, repeated at different times, is a whine, an imprecation. He lures the Prisoner to hope, then softly and (in Dallapiccola's directions) "sweetly" brings the Prisoner to the fires of the inquisition.

For any other composer, the music would range on the demonic or ironic. But Dallapiccola gives him music which is jaunty, jumpy, delightful. The lightness, in triplets, in ballads, in confident humor, is ghastly. Dallapiccola has the Italianate innate sense of opera dramaturgy, and this is it.

The prologue belongs to the Mother, with Lori Phillips singing first of love and then hatred of the demonic King Philip II, both the Italian and English words, vile and evil.

Even in these two chamber operas, Dallapiccola adds, hardly realistically, choruses of great importance. In *The Prisoner* especially, the Concert Chorale of New York sings the transformed medieval verses of the Mass at times to bring the psychological import home. (Inevitably, one thinks of climax of *Tosca*'s first act.)

I feel guilty in praising Leon Botstein once again. Other critics honestly can find holes in his performances, but I am always so astonished by what he brings to light—sometimes radiant light—that I can overlook the fact that the American Symphony Orchestra is not the NY Phil. Their challenges are extraordinary, and Maestro Botstein somehow makes them gloriously

apparent, even in staged performances.

That glory is certainly true in these Dallapiccola works. (The composer doesn't call them operas at all. *Night Flight* is called "One Act", while *The Prisoner* is called "Prologue and One Act"). Dramatically, they show a genius easily rivaling Puccini. Musically, he and Berg could be considered the two "colorists" of Schoenberg's grayish theory.

Psychologically, Dallapiccola is not a polemicist or a "political" writer. He surveys the human condition, he queries hope, fate, illusion and the inevitability of mortality, and he turns even the ashes of death into the radiance of inspiration.