



ROYAL OPERA HOUSE

25<sup>th</sup> of October 2006

## La Cantatrice; or, The Story of Writing an Absurd Opera

In its new initiative to find original approaches to opera and music theatre for the 21st century and also new audiences for the lyric stage, OperaGenesis are working with French composer Jean Phillippe Calvin to complete a one-act, absurdist piece based on the Eugene Ionesco play, *La Cantatrice Chauve* or *The Bald Soprano*. Calvin writes an introductory explanation of what he is doing as he finishes the piece and looks forward to Premiere in London on the 12<sup>th</sup> of November. *La Cantatrice* is a joint commission by the Royal Opera House & Genesis Foundation.



Jean Philippe Calvin

Since last November (2005) one of my long-standing dreams has been coming to fruition. Thanks to the Genesis Foundation and its OperaGenesis programme at the Royal Opera House, Covent Garden, in London, I am just about to finish my opera *La Cantatrice*. It was inspired by Eugene Ionesco's famous absurdist play, *La Cantatrice Chauve*.

The choice of this monumental and iconic piece of absurd theatre and the idea of putting it to music has always excited me. It appeals to me in a very Ionescian way, in fact, because it is a play where we can find comedy, desire and satire, laughter and chaos, in a wonderful melange. As we say in French "Du bon usage des absurdités".

Music drama, opera and theatre are an important part of my world both as a young creator and as a member of the audience. I use these forms quite often in my creations, even in my instrumental works. In my mind there is always a *mis-en-scène*. This approach to my compositions, as if always writing scenic music, goes back a long time; and it was accentuated by my work with Sir Michael Tippett and Meirion Bowen.

My hope is that, having started with the idea of play and anti-play in Ionesco's work, I will be able to create a new form of *opera buffa* in one act relying on an approach that involves music and anti-music, a true *opera buffa* for the 21st century.

## Musical Approach

The originality of the Ionesco text requires an original musical approach, one with which I have been playing in my mind since I first ran across the play. In fact you can still see it in its original production in Paris today at La Huchette Theatre where it has run continuously since 1959 with another Ionesco play, *La Leçon*, as the second part of the evening. (London has its Agatha Christie play, *The Mousetrap*, which has now run for over half a century; and Paris has its parallel long run in a double bill of Ionesco's *The Bald Soprano* and *The Chairs*. Perhaps this says something about the two cities? Certainly, I do not think the Agatha Christie would lend itself to treatment as a modern opera buffa!). My main motivation is simply this: wouldn't it be wonderful finally to see a modern opera that is genuinely comic? One that uses all the resources available of modern digital music making as well? It is rare for contemporary opera to be comic, let alone Theatre of the Absurd comic!

I found myself wondering: just as Gluck was once inspired to reform opera by Italian Opera Buffa, can we perhaps inspire something new in contemporary opera for a contemporary audience based on the vision of Ionesco? This has been the question that has informed all my work on this piece so far.

Creating something completely new, fresh and dynamic by using today's most recent musical technology and vocal writing seems to me to be the way forward. I am fortunate in finding full support for my approach at Royal Opera House from everyone involved with the OperaGenesis programme.

The full means at our disposal are being used - live singers, traditional orchestral instruments, electronic music and treated voices.

We are creating one individual work of music theatre while, we hope, at the same time developing new and exciting approaches that will also attract new and younger audiences to opera houses. This is their world and it will be reflected on the stage and in the music.

A small scale production with a medium-sized chamber orchestra and live electronics, that's all we need to make a real breakthrough in what contemporary opera is all about. I use electronics purely in relation to the orchestra and singers to add a new dimension to my work and to the drama, as well as some modern sonorities.

*The Bald Soprano* satirizes those who value conformism over independent thought. It proceeds by undermining the belief or trust in the accuracy of language as an accurate means of communication and logic as a means of understanding the world. The Smiths - proudly prudish and anti-intellectual - are virtually interchangeable with their friends, the Martins, since the language they speak is entirely formulaic.

Both couples are certain they know the world, that they have complete understanding. Therefore, they have stopped thinking and so have nothing to communicate.

Logic cannot help the Smiths unravel who is who when discussing a family all of whose members are named Bobby Watson. Mr. Martin thinks he can use logic to determine if Mrs. Martin is, in fact, someone he knows. But even after he believes he has proven that he and Mrs. Martin are married, the Smiths' maid reveals that Mr. Martin has only piled up an extraordinary set of coincidences. When both couples sit down to talk it is a disaster since no one can think of anything to say. The appearance of the Fire Chief and the bout of story-telling that ensues only delays the final chaos of random words and sounds into which the characters descend.