

Heart Chamber Review

A man and a woman fall in love; of all operatic clichés, this is surely one of the most perennial. However, even before the curtain was raised at the Deutsche Oper, there were indications that there was much more to *Heart Chamber* than such a simplification might suggest. Indeed, the trajectory of Czernowin's previous three operas, beginning with *Prima...Ins Innere* (1998–1999), followed by *Zaide / Adama* (2004–2005) and most recently *Infinite Now* (2016) shows that this is a composer who seeks to explore and question the very nature of opera whenever she works within the genre.

At one level, the premise of *Heart Chamber* is unnervingly simple. A chance encounter causes a woman and a man to meet and fall in love. As their relationship develops, they experience difficulties, which are ultimately resolved. However, Czernowin has been keen to point out that narrative details such as gender and age are unimportant; the libretto represents an experience that is both archetypal and universal. Deutsche Oper's symposium on new musical theatre, which began on the afternoon of the premiere, included discussion of *Heart Chamber* and allowed the attendees to hear directly from Czernowin and the creative team. A recurring theme was the work's profound intimacy. In examining the almost ubiquitous experience of falling in love in forensic detail, *Heart Chamber* exposes the complex, often contradictory changes to the inner worlds of two people as they form a relationship. There is a sense in which the work's intimacy is also a reflection of Czernowin's deeply personal approach to her subject matter. Unlike her other operas, Czernowin also wrote the libretto of *Heart Chamber*. The work is dedicated to her husband, Steven Takasugi.

Heart Chamber navigates the emotional landscapes of its two main characters with a subtlety and sensitivity that permeates its every aspect. The opening double bass solo (Uli Fussenegger) ranges from high harmonics to the very lowest notes of the instrument, coloured with sul ponticello and many other bowing techniques. From the start, this material creates a sense of brittle fragility and emotional intensity, setting the scene for what is to come. Playing from an area to the front and right of the stage, the double bass is gradually joined by The Voice (Frauke Aulbert) and members of Ensemble Nickel. When the curtain is raised, and we see the two protagonists seated on stage, in front of a video projection (rocafilm) of the same two singers, it is as though our perspective has suddenly shifted. While the singers appear almost motionless, the video shows them separately leaving an apartment and walking out into an unnamed, urban landscape. Following the opening scene, the set rotates to reveal an architectural structure, reminiscent of the type of later twentieth-century urban planning that is ubiquitous from Birmingham to Berlin. But there is a simple beauty to Christian Schmidt's designs, complemented by Urs Schönebaum's lighting. The set's rotations reveal different aspects of the construction, echoing the work's shifts in perspective with an effect akin to an Escher illustration. The stage direction (Claus Guth) and dramaturgy (Yvonne Gebauer and Dorothea Hartmann) further amplify the sense of shifting vantage points. On-stage movement is beautifully choreographed, juxtaposing an impression of suspended animation against multidirectional temporal movement. A striking example of this occurs when a woman slowly falls as she

passes a man ascending the stairs. As the set rotates, her actions are repeated in reverse, and she slowly falls upwards to regain her starting position.

The multi-layered nature of the work permeates every element of Czernowin's musical material. It is striking (and initially surprising) to hear the quotation of a Monteverdi aria at one point, yet in the context of *Heart Chamber's* temporal layers and shifting perspectives, it makes perfect sense to include a reference to another operatic love story. Traces of memory and history are also present in other aspects of the work's sound world. For instance, conductor Johannes Kalitzke describes the striking choral texture of the final movement as a distant echo of the Renaissance madrigal tradition. Similarly, the electronics, which are largely constructed from manually produced sounds, allude to specific moments in time by virtue of the fact that they contain clear traces of the ways in which they were generated.

The electronic layer (realised by SWR Experimentalstudio and directed by Joachim Haas, Lukas Nowok and Carlo Laurenzi) forms a stratum which is sometimes barely present, and at other times completely immersive. The intricacy and detail of *Heart Chamber's* electronic layer closely mirrors the beautiful fragility of the ensemble and vocal material. The way in which Czernowin uses subtle, delicate sounds to communicate inner worlds is closely linked to her longstanding interest in ASMR (Autonomous Sensory Meridian Response). This autonomic physical reaction can be triggered by delicate movements or sounds, such as breathing or the plucking of a comb's teeth, both of which are heard in *Heart Chamber*. ASMR has been described as a tingling sensation of spontaneous, euphoric relaxation, akin to stepping into a hot bath on a cold day. I can attest that *Heart Chamber's* fragile, ephemeral sound world does indeed trigger this response at numerous times during the work. Czernowin's masterful use of ASMR places the audience at the centre of the protagonists' inner worlds, allowing an instinctive, visceral connection that resists the conventional separation of audience and performer.

The fascinating, fragile yet emotionally charged inner world of *Heart Chamber* is not confined to the work's electronic layer. Indeed, the effectiveness of the electronics is, in part, due to the way in which Czernowin's palette of vocal, instrumental and electronic material is so thoroughly integrated, encompassing moments of barely audible subtlety and loud, dramatic climaxes. In addition to the expert subtlety of Ensemble Nikel, and the evident skill of the Orchestra of the Deutsche Oper under conductor Johannes Kalitzke, the singers contribute an astounding versatility. Czernowin describes how the vocal parts use the full spectrum of vocal utterance, from speech to song and everything in between. Whereas *Heart Chamber's* instrumental and electronic elements open up the protagonists' inner worlds, the vocal writing quite literally separates the different aspects of the two characters. Soprano Patrizia Ciofi, ('She'), is paired with contralto Noa Frenkel ('Her Inner Voice'). 'He' (baritone Dietrich Henschel) finds a counterpart in 'His Inner Voice' (countertenor Terry Wey). At times, internal and external voices contradict each other. Vocal material frequently overlaps in the same register, further alluding to the arbitrary nature of the protagonists' genders. The vocal ensemble, positioned in a box to the right of the auditorium, adds to the varied palette of vocal sound, often seeming to meld with the electronics and with subtle, noise-rich playing techniques from within the ensemble and orchestra.

It is in the integration and cohesion of its different elements that *Heart Chamber* makes such a profound impact. Its great strength lies in the fact that it is neither a staged concert work nor a play set to music. Its expressive, communicative power is derived from the complete interaction of its constituent elements; to say what it has to say, it can only be an opera. If critics question the relevance of a contemporary operatic love story, there can surely be no better riposte than *Heart Chamber*.