Die Soldaten by Bernd Alois Zimmermann

The MIT Faculty has made this article openly available. Please share how this access benefits you. Your story matters.

As its fiftieth anniversary approaches, Die Soldaten seems to be making a renewed bid for canonicity: it has been staged in six cities since 2002 and will be produced in two more in 2014. So it is an auspicious time to have a new production released on video, the first to be widely available since the Stuttgart production was re-released on DVD (Arthaus Musik, 100270 [2002, 1989]). With its excellent musical performances, detailed characterization, and straightforward direction, this performance, recorded at the Salzburg Festival in August 2012, stands as an eminently plausible record of an important and difficult twentieth-century work.

Three of the principals deserve the highest praise: Laura Aikin, as Marie, Tomasz Konieczny, as her fiancé Stozius, and Daniel Brenna, as Desportes, the soldier responsible for Marie’s ruin. Aikin in particular is astonishing, bringing complication and emotion to the role in her physical acting, in her facial expressions, and above all in her vocalism (she is a celebrated Lulu with formidable atonal credentials). Brenna’s registral extremes, especially at the high end, come across as appropriately strained yet precisely colored as he ranges from a capably menacing seducer to a contemptible villain. Konieczny seethes with rage and frustration throughout much of the opera, biting into spiky, bitter lines. All three characterizations are convincing, grounded, and physically dynamic.

Orchestrally, too, it is hard to imagine a more expert team, as the Vienna Philharmonic (conducted by Ingo Metzmacher) brings its singular confidence and virtuosity to bear on a fiendishly difficult score. Balance is mostly excellent (except when intertwining vocal lines overlap with occasionally thick orchestral textures, as in the Toccatas), and the sound quality is crystal clear, bringing to light an impressive sense of the score’s timbral details. The collage moments (e.g. the Baroque counterpoint, the Bach chorale, the jazz) all come across beautifully.
The production, by Alvis Hermanis, has much to recommend it. The overall aesthetic is realistic and coherent, gritty but historically specific. The “riding school” back-story of the Felsenreitschule is emphasized with hay bales and live horses, and the hall’s abundant vertical space is exploited, as when a body double for Marie walks a symbolic tightrope. A long bank of windows allows for many striking visuals, including silhouettes, military crowds, and projected images (mostly of vintage pornography). Behind the windows and in a narrow box at the stage’s midpoint, Hermanis sets a series of interesting pantomime sequences during the opera’s orchestral passages.

Except for a not-entirely-literal pregnancy, most directorial interventions hew closely to the original playwright’s basic story; more significant is that the opera’s traditionally anti-war ideology is de-emphasized in favor of a general critique of masculine aggression. Hence the militant drumbeat of Zimmermann’s ending, instead of corresponding to the prescribed images and sounds of soldiers and bombs, accompanies Marie as she writhes and grasps at the air ritualistically, perched high above a final image of a woman on a cross.

The opera’s complicated timelines are generally aided by the camera work, which helpfully switches perspectives between multiple sites of action while maintaining a sense of the overall picture. The exception is the simultaneous scene in Act IV, in which the camera and the subtitles do frustratingly little to clarify the chaos. Then again, in scenes in which the music and drama are comparatively stable, the cuts can be too busy (e.g. in the Countess’ monologue or the Act III trio). The frequent close-ups, however, are genuinely moving, thanks to the high caliber of the acting. Overall, the production is filmed in a way that captures the opera’s weight, drama, and complication, without entirely confining it.

Emily Richmond Pollock

Massachusetts Institute of Technology