

Rembrandt's Wife

Composer's note

Approaching work on *Rembrandt's Wife*, I was sure of a couple of things. First, because this is a piece with a very strong story, I was determined that it would be told as clearly as possible. I have seen too many operas (and opera productions) over the years, where I had no idea who was doing what to whom or why. I didn't want *Rembrandt's Wife* to be one of those. The second thing was that I wanted our opera to be, from start to finish, truly singable.

Of course I realise this might sound strange. What, after all, would the singers be doing in an opera if not singing? Well, there is now a century-old tradition of opera and music-theatre in which the singers also shout and scream and howl, and occasionally attempt to produce chords, and when they *do* sing seem only to employ wide intervals of sevenths and ninths (and lots of tritones) so that the melodic lines are extremely jagged and vocally rather ungrateful. Let me stress that there are plenty of masterpieces that fall into this broad (and admittedly overstated) description, including Berg's *Wozzeck* and *Lulu* (perhaps my favourite 20th-century opera), Schoenberg's *Moses und Aron* and later works such as Birtwistle's *Punch and Judy* and Maxwell Davies's *Eight Songs for a Mad King*. What's more, I've written these sorts of vocal lines myself in the past. But this time I didn't want to. It's partly that the style seems hopelessly old fashioned – fine for Viennese expressionists and over-the-top 1960s music-theatre composers, but now as 'period' as a baroque trill and (let's be blunt) a bit of a cliché. But it's also partly to do with my having reached an acceptance of the operatic genre.

In my earlier stage works I was, I now see, absurdly self-conscious. I kept asking myself: why are these people singing? Fortunately I was always able to find reasons. In my first opera, *Poe*, the 19th-century American writer was a rather extreme character, prone to excessive flights of fancy and, in his personal and business life, seldom having a tight grip on reality. Singing, then, represented his state of mind and the crazier he became, the more floridly he sang. In *Night and dreams: the death of Sigmund Freud*, the father of psychoanalysis tells the audience his dreams, and of course in his dreams he sings (of *course!*). You see what I mean about self-consciousness.

At the ripe old age of 50, I had an epiphany. The main reason people sing in operas is because they are opera singers. No further justification is required. So, apart from a single (whispered) word, in *Rembrandt's Wife* everyone sings. And while there are certainly some sevenths and I think a few ninths and plenty of tritones in their vocal lines, virtually everything they sing is what I would call 'lyrical' – even when the vocal lines are closest to 'recitative'.

The ideal state of mind for a composer – probably for any artist, and certainly for me – is to be unselfconscious. You hope that the work itself will take over and start to dictate its own terms. Sometimes this will happen even in a short instrumental piece, but when you have a 30-page libretto to set to music, you can tend to forget you are writing music at all. In a sense your relationship to the text is that of a director to an actor. You try to make the funny bits funnier, the sad bits sadder, and the confrontational bits more confronting. You are responsible, after all, for how those words will come out of the singers' mouths: you are deciding how quickly or slowly they come, how loudly or softly; which words will be emphasised, which repeated, which delayed.

When the libretto is as strong as Sue Smith's for *Rembrandt's Wife*, the words themselves often seem to tell you which note to write next. I have seldom composed as unselfconsciously as in this piece, and, sitting in the rehearsal room, months later, I was occasionally shocked at what I'd written – in particular the extent of the simple lyricism in the scenes between Rembrandt and Saskia.

I made no conscious choice to do this. In trying to tell the story as clearly as possible and to write singable lines, it just happened.

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