4.48 Psychosis – Broadsheet and online magazine reviews.

The Independent ★★★★★

4.48 Psychosis, Lyric Hammersmith, review: Sarah Kane's final play about her suicidal depression compells

A first ever operatic setting by Royal Opera/Guildhall Composer-in-Residence Philip Venables for Sarah Kane's play

Suffering from suicidal depression, playwright Sarah Kane experienced her sharpest, most anguished clarity at 4.48am: hence her visceral final play, 4.48 Psychosis. In it, mental extremes are unflinchingly distilled. Wreathed in dark humour or bleak, lyrical beauty, words fragment and coalesce through angry pain and medicated stupor into skinless and terrible lucid freedom.

Where this first-ever operatic setting by Royal Opera House Guildhall composer-in-residence Philip Venables succeeds is through simple honesty. With a score ranging guilelessly from motoric arrhythmia to wispy renaissance, director Ted Huffman and team attempt neither dramatic adornment nor explanation but allow the text to breathe within a kaleidoscope of inner-outer conflict.

On a bare, white-walled stage, six well-matched female singers – led by an outstanding Gweneth-Ann Rand – shuffle greyly distressed. Around them, phrases appear and dissolve in projected sound and video while, above, a superb Chroma ensemble (sensitively conducted by Richard Baker) charts the disintegration of their hive mind. Duelling percussionists parley in a doctor-patient morse code. A tapestry of strings, accordion and saxes evoke polyphonies of yearning, while tenderly but inexorably we encounter hopeless recesses of the mind. Knowledge of Kane's suicide shortly after writing the play can only make this humane and understated piece the more compelling.

Steph Power, Thursday 26 May 2016

The Telegraph ★★★★

4.48 Psychosis opera is rawly powerful and laceratingly honest – review

Previous Sarah Kane-sceptic Rupert Christiansen is impressed by this new operatic adaptation of her pitch-black signature work

Incense rises from the altars of the cult of Sarah Kane, the playwright who hanged herself at the age of 28 in 1999. I've never been inclined to worship there, partly from my impatience with her conviction that only despair is emotionally authentic, and partly because I once got stuck next to her at a party and found her repellently surly and chippy.

Yet Philip Venables's one-act, 90-minute opera, drawn from *4.48 Psychosis* – Kane's last piece of theatrical writing - is so rawly powerful and laceratingly honest that I feel I should reconsider.

The text takes the form of 24 fragmentary episodes, divided without stage directions or named characters between an unspecified number of actors (the late work of Samuel Beckett is an obvious influence).

Vacillating between prose and poetry, sometimes violently paranoid, sometimes coldly analytical in tenour, it explores in zig-zag yet compulsive fashion the inner life of someone whose clinical depression has led to suicidal madness – the title referring to the daily moment of waking when sanity might or might not briefly reassert itself.

The opera uses six women singers, focusing on a central self-loathing, self-harming figure (Gweneth Ann Rand) who finally takes her own life as Kane did. We see her with her ineffectual psychiatrist, we hear a sickening catalogue of her meds and their side-effects, we feel the cockroaches crawling through her brain as she screams contempt for those who reach out to help her. Her solipsism is absolute: she has no remorse, no compassion, no self-respect or discipline. She wants only to stop her inner daemons, without having any desire for death.

Venables's high-pitched score is a soundscape that imaginatively penetrates and dramatises the heart of this darkness. Ferocious peremptory drum beats mingle ironically with cocktail-hour smooch broadcast from the radio; the vocal writing veers between monotonous chant and shrieking anguish; and there are even moments of melancholy beauty, when the women harmonise laments for a lost life of beauty, friendship, value.

All praise to the Chroma ensemble, conducted by Richard Baker, and the totally committed cast, who must find constant exposure to such negativity extremely draining. Framed by a clinically white box on to the walls of which fragments of the text are projected, Ted Huffman's finely choreographed staging strikes the right note of unrelieved austerity. This is an urgent message from black-dog hell, and it should not go unheeded.

Rupert Christiansen, 25 May 2016

The Guardian ★★★★

4.48 Psychosis review – Venables brings Sarah Kane's savage text to musical life

Philip Venables proves he's one of the finest composers around with an intricate score inspired by Kane's very personal story of clinical depression

The first opera to be based on the work of Sarah Kane, *4.48 Psychosis* by Philip Venables is a setting of Kane's final play, a bitter and lyrical meditation on the nature of clinical depression, haunted by the fact that Kane killed herself shortly after its completion. Though it avoids the overt violence that made her earlier work notorious, it remains an extreme text, dissolving character, narrative and theatrical artifice in its quest for absolute emotional expression. It is acutely dependent on rhythm, verbal repetition and cyclic thematic patterning, but also innately musical – a pre-existing libretto, waiting for a composer, you might say – and Venables has done wonderful things with it.

Kane gives no indication as to the required number of performers, or whether her dialogues are actual or internalised in a single consciousness. Venables sets the text for a group of eight: three sopranos and three mezzos, often singing in close polyphony, along with two percussionists from the ensemble Chroma, positioned above Hannah Clark's consulting room set. They duel and duet above the singers' heads as unsung passages are streamed across its walls.

"Depression is anger," Kane maintains, frequently reserving her scorn for unsympathetic medics who dole out "chemical cures for congenital anguish", and the rhythms of her words are battered out by drums, hammers, whips, even a saw cutting through wood. But the yearning, intricate vocal writing – Monteverdian in its timelessness – poignantly reminds us that depression is also the absence of love. Even in despair, Kane could be a savage ironist, and brassy, postmodern toccatas accompany the endless prescriptions of anti-depressants. The word "silence" was her only stage direction; Venables fills those pauses with distant muzak, among the most unnerving sounds in the work.

Ted Huffman's production has a disturbing fluidity as the personae of the six singers merge and morph, though soprano Gweneth-Ann Rand is rapidly identified as the protagonist, while mezzo Lucy Schaufer emerges as the ambiguously motivated doctor, who may be a

projection of Rand's psyche. The other four (Susanna Hurrell, Clare Presland, Jennifer Davis and Emily Edmonds) snipe and console with eerie vividness. Chroma, conducted by Richard Baker, play with almost unnerving precision.

The intensity slips fractionally at the end. Venables brings the score to a close with a consoling threnody that gazes back to the purities of Renaissance instrumental music, while on the stage pills are swallowed and a noose is strung up. In a production that continuously and precariously blurs the boundary between reality and illusion, the final image feels a bit too literal. But 4:48 Psychosis is a remarkable achievement. The Royal Opera and the Guildhall School of Music and Drama should be congratulated on commissioning it as part of their joint doctoral composer-in-residence scheme. And above all, it confirms Philip Venables's reputation as one of the finest of the younger generation of composers working today.

Tim Ashley, 25 May 2016

The Times ★★★★

Opera: 4.48 Psychosis at the Lyric Hammersmith, W6

Every self-harming syllable of Sarah Kane's angry play is clear as Philip Venables finds a musical vocabulary for the drugs that treat depression

Zopiclone, Sertraline and Mellaril. Lofepramine, Citalopram and Fluoxetine. Thorazine, Venlafaxine and Temazepam. One hundred aspirin and a bottle of Bulgarian red. Philip Venables's opera *4.48 Psychosis* is adapted from Sarah Kane's compact, angry play, the last she wrote before her suicide in 1999.

It finds a musical vocabulary for the substances with which we treat depression; the symptoms of anxiety, anhedonia and insomnia; the shame and grief; the cyclical conversations with "inscrutable doctors, sensible doctors, way-out doctors, doctors you'd think were f***ing patients if you weren't shown proof".

Much of that music is already there in the staccato rhythms of Kane's text, its severity, profanity, logic and humour. In Ted Huffman's Royal Opera/Lyric Hammersmith production with the ensemble Chroma and the conductor Richard Baker, six female singers play the narrator, doubling silently as the doctors and nurses who prescribe and administer drugs and ECT in the hot white box of Hannah Clark's set.

Led by Gweneth-Ann Rand, the women croon, keen, declaim and shriek in strident, pinching harmonies. Their voices overlap in a sequence of first-person histories broken by patient-doctor dialogues in which Kane's words are projected on the walls and "voiced" by the percussionists Sarah Hatch and Genevieve Wilkins.

Is it OK to laugh? Yes. Doctor This, Doctor That and Doctor Whatsit are a snare drum, a saw and metal bars. Kane — or her depression — is a big bass drum. Question marks are indicated by the trite ping of a typewriter bell. Underscoring it is the cheesy, sexless, samba-rhythm shimmy of lift-music.

Chroma's strings, saxophones, accordion and synthesizer smear and blur in parallel to the drugs, sometimes delicately, sometimes violently. Every self-harming syllable of the text is clear. There are neon-bright salutes to Bartók's *Bluebeard* (a blast of Door Five C major), and a lament derived from the Agnus Dei of Bach's B minor Mass.

Only when Kane slides into poetic self-indulgence ("the capture, the rapture, the rupture") does Venables sag. Trimming 10 minutes from the current 90 won't be easy. In the meantime, I can only praise the musicality, discipline and bravery shown by Rand, Clare Presland, Lucy Schaufer, Susanna Hurrell, Emily Edmonds and Jennifer Davis.

Anna Picard, May 26 2016

The Observer ★★★★

Oedipe; 4.48 Psychosis; Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg; Il barbiere di Siviglia – review

A superb cast ignites Enescu's neglected 1936 epic in its UK premiere. And Philip Venables makes Sarah Kane's final work sing

[…] A line in Sarah Kane's final play, 4.48 Psychosis, might have been uttered by Oedipus: "I feel that the future is hopeless and that things cannot improve." Kane killed herself in 1999 aged 28. Without named characters or stage direction, her pithy text has been made into an opera by Philip Venables, resident composer at the Royal Opera in collaboration with Guildhall School of Music and Drama. Kane's piece is a litany of despair. It captures truthfully the swivels, brake runs and lurches of a mind in torment. Its subject needs no further analysis; Kane has done the job for us.

The revelation is how Venables has enriched her play through music. He challenges the conventions of opera. Via an array of resources he ambushes and refreshes an old art form. His technique is that of a collagist. Text is variously spoken, projected, amplified, conveyed rhythmically with percussion and sung, often in aria-like lament or chorale outburst. Snatches of Purcell – a mini viola fantasia arrests the action for several moments – and Bach coexist with high-energy funk reminiscent of the late Steve Martland.

On reading later that Martland was Venables's teacher, I can hear that element as a tribute rather than an imitation. I need to know more of Venables's music to find his own musical identity: my task, not his. High praise to the 12 members of Chroma, and the conductor, Venables's fellow composer Richard Baker. An ideal foil to the music, Ted Huffman's staging, set in a white, three-doored room designed by Hannah Clark with lighting by DM Wood, was crisp and minimal. The cast consists of six female singers. Each pulls with equal weight and delivers the raw text with selfless commitment: Jennifer Davis, Emily Edmonds, Susanna Hurrell, Clare Presland, Gweneth-Ann Rand, Lucy Schaufer. […]

Fiona Maddocks, 29 May 2016

The Financial Times ★★★★

4.48 Psychosis, Lyric Hammersmith, London — 'Unhinged and chilling'

Philip Venables' opera is true to the spirit of Sarah Kane's gruelling study of depression

Had Sarah Kane written 4.48 Psychosis with the intention of turning it into an opera, she could hardly have served her purpose better. Lyrical, violent and emotionally distilled, this 1999 play profiles clinical depression with an unflinching directness. The result is almost music in words. Yet Kane, who hanged herself shortly after completing the work, did not want it adapted into other mediums. For 15 years after her suicide, no composer touched it.

So Philip Venables, the first composer who has, is in a pressurised position. His new opera — a collaboration between the Royal Opera House and the Guildhall School of Music, where he is doctoral composer-in-residence — bends over backwards to preserve the spirit of Kane's text. As in the play, there is little sense of narrative, or characters' identities, or anything that would keep us grounded. Six

identically costumed female singers work as what Venables calls “a hive mind”, sharing the parts of the therapist and the patient, who descends into suicidal depression. Meanwhile Kane’s text is spoken, sung and projected on screens: it seems to emanate from everywhere.

But Venables’ achievement is bigger than that. He manages to enhance Kane’s groundbreaking format with his own unbuttoned imagination. His score lurches between chattering polyphony, sounds of sawing wood, and post-romantic arias, spiced up with eerie violin shrieks. In the exchanges between patient and therapist, two percussionists thrash out rhythmic speech patterns as the text appears on screens beneath them. Then, when the din fades away, we’re left with the indifferent tinkle of elevator music. It’s unhinged and chilling, albeit laced with Kane’s trademark humour. Most of all, it is dizzyingly colourful.

Ted Huffman’s production does well to keep things simple, locating the action in a whiter-than-white hospital room. The singers are similarly blank canvases; if anything, the Chroma ensemble instrumentalists, under Richard Baker, play more of a starring role. But soprano Gweneth-Ann Rand supplies the production’s most disturbing images. We see her screaming in agony. We see her choking in a panic attack. Finally we see her gazing at a noose. Then lights out.

Hannah Nepil, May 25, 2016

The Arts Desk ★★★★

4.48 Psychosis, Royal Opera, Lyric Hammersmith

A musical dramatisation of Sarah Kane's classic play finds both pain and consolation

New operas are a risky business, or so the Royal Opera’s past experience teaches us. For years, visiting the company’s Linbury Studio Theatre was like rolling the dice while on a losing streak: vain, desperate hope followed inevitably by disappointment. *Glare*, *The Virtues of Things*, *Clemency*, the failed experiment that was OperaShots. But recently things have taken a turn. Gradually, thanks to works from Birtwistle, Haas and more, the risk has begun to pay off. Now Philip Venables’s *4.48 Psychosis* – the first opera to emerge from the Royal Opera’s joint Composer-in-Residence doctorate with the Guildhall School of Music & Drama – gives the company its first truly home-grown hit.

Sarah Kane’s final work (first staged at the Royal Court in 2000, over a year after the author’s suicide) is art stripped of its aesthetic shell. 4.48 Psychosis has no characters, no setting, no stage direction beyond frequent silences. It’s a play only in so far as it is written by a playwright, performed on a stage. It’s this very indeterminacy, this fluidity that makes this urgent meditation on love, depression and death so natural a vehicle for someone else’s art. What Kane gives us is naked emotion; what Venables does is clothe it in music.

Like a dramatic *Waste Land*, 4.48 is a collection of fragments – characters, conversations, vignettes, moments – shored against ruin. Picking his way through the chattering textual landscape with infinite care and understanding, cutting little text and adding none, Venables groups the material into genres. The structure that emerges is something like a sketch show; musical and dramatic tropes or textures return again and again, gaining weight and significance cumulatively through repetition and juxtaposition.

Conversations between the central character and her doctor, for example, are rendered – in a brilliant bit of musical inspiration – by percussion. Text appears, projected in Ted Huffman’s production onto the white walls of the set, and is “spoken” rhythmically by pairs of untuned percussion characters – a bass drum and a side drum, for example. The effect of these wordless exchanges is gloriously bathetic. There’s whimsy here but also sharper-edged wit, as when the drum punches out Kane’s dry retort to criticism of an over-elaborate suicide plan: “It couldn’t possibly be misconstrued as a cry for help.”

Other recurring textures include the use of pre-recorded elevator muzak (musical punctuation between episodes), and a frenetic Glass-esque chuntering of wind instruments to accompany a numeric visual motif. Set against these fixed musical landmarks, stand-alone episodes make far greater impact. An exquisite aria for Clare Presland, sung over a synthesised accompaniment, is equal parts Purcell and pop song, a musical memory that offers a sustained moment of stillness, refusing to give way to the assault of other words and sounds.

A cast of six female singers – sopranos Jennifer Davis, Susanna Hurrell and Gweneth-Ann Rand, and mezzos Emily Edmonds, Clare Presland and Lucy Schaufer – share Kane’s fractured text among themselves, with the help of pre-recorded speech and the musical interventions of CHROMA, conducted here by Richard Baker. Venables’s orchestration (light on strings, heavy on saxophones and keyboards textures) is spare but telling, cultivating a mechanistic quality even when combining purely acoustic instruments that refuses to sentimentalise the outpourings of Kane’s speakers. Paired with the heady, giddy texture of so many upper voices, the result feels dangerously unanchored, unmoored from bass certainty and support.

With so much of the drama taking place either in music or text (projected or spoken), Huffman’s job as a director is largely to keep out of the way. This he does efficiently enough, treating his cast variously as split personalities of a single self and also as outside individuals – doctors, friends, possibly even lovers. Rand (pictured left) provides the central self, her physical vulnerability at odds with her vocal control, while each of the other singers takes it in turns to dominate, to voice a specific set of concerns or preoccupations.

A final ensemble brings all voices together as lapping waves of sound – a rare moment of musical calm, that hints at a redemption, or at least a peace, that the text cannot find for itself. It’s a moment in which ownership of this drama seems to change hands, passing from written word to musical sound, from Kane to Venables.

Alexandra Coghlan, 25 May 2016

The Stage ★★★★

4.48 Psychosis review at Lyric Hammersmith – ‘startling and immensely moving’

Philip Venables defines himself as a composer concerned with sexuality, violence and politics. For his ambitious new work, he has secured the rights to turn Sarah Kane’s final play into an opera.

The play’s own history – it was completed shortly before the writer’s suicide in February 1999 – will inevitably colour responses to his piece as much as the original work itself.

Kane does not list characters or assign individual lines to one speaker or another. Venables has chosen to set the text for six female singers plus an orchestra of 12 players – here the specialist new-music ensemble Chroma performing under the expert baton of conductor Richard Baker.

Almost nothing has been cut from Kane’s text. The spoken word has regularly been one of Venables’ preoccupations, and here passages are not only sung or spoken but also chanted by members of the cast as a group, or even just whispered or shouted.

Venables’ most startling technical innovation occurs when a doctor/patient conversation is projected on to the set while also being performed purely in speech rhythm by two percussionists. At such moments, the surprising humour hidden in Kane’s text is brilliantly underlined.

Elsewhere, Venables includes manic instrumental interludes – "nasty fucked-up computer game music", as the score describes them –

passages of ‘elevator music’ of the kind you might encounter in a hospital waiting room, and specific references to the Baroque period. The result is a wide-ranging stylistic melange that counterpoints the freewheeling intellectual sophistication and through-the-floor psychological depths reached in Kane’s play.

Hannah Clark’s sparse designs and Ted Huffman’s unfussy production both focus attention on the individual performances, either in solo scenes or in interactions that are virtually choreographic in their detail and expressive power. The six singers do not disappoint in their outstanding contributions to an immensely moving piece.

George Hall, May 25, 2016

Music OMH ★★★★

4.48 Psychosis @ Lyric Hammersmith, London

4.48 Psychosis was the final play that Sarah Kane wrote before her suicide in 1999, and was performed for the first time in 2000. Given that it is about someone who contemplates, and then commits, suicide, it is easy to see it as purely representing Kane’s own state of mind, cries of despair or suicide note to the world. Such a view, however, ignores the experimentation with text that Kane had demonstrated from her very first play *Blasted* (1995) onwards, and which in itself provides many reasons why *4.48 Psychosis* emerged in the way that it did.

The play takes its name from the time in the morning when Kane would often wake in her depressed state, and consists of one person pouring out her (suicidal) feelings. Given the musicality of the text it always offered potential as an opera and British composer Philip Venables’ new version, created in a joint programme between the Royal Opera and Guildhall School of Music and Drama, now enjoys its world premiere at the Lyric Hammersmith in a production directed by Ted Huffman.

Although the play is about one woman’s state of mind, theatrically it can be presented in many ways and the premiere employed three people. Here, the part of the woman is played by six female singers, which allows (sometimes discordant) harmonies to be rendered, enables the various facets of her character to emerge, and alludes to the voices in her head that speak to her. One singer takes on the role of the psychiatrist, but even she is the woman as she is recalling what the psychiatrist said to her in their meetings.

Venables’ score, played by the CHROMA Ensemble conducted by Richard Baker, is poignant and atmospheric and suits the words very well. It allows some to be uttered slowly, and others to be rattled through in a haze, signifying how someone’s thoughts can rush in and pile on top of each other. While this *4.48 Psychosis* undoubtedly constitutes an opera, the music is best understood as a contributory component to a sensory experience that is also created through word, setting, gesture, movement and sound in the widest sense of the word. We sometimes hear the radio play or ‘voiceovers’ from offstage. Similarly, ‘arias’, cries of despair or religious sounding music can be abruptly interrupted by other sounds, revealing how thought patterns can shift and some feelings drown out others.

The woman’s meetings with the psychiatrist are sometimes played out with two percussion instruments exchanging their sounds while the words appear as surtitles on the set’s wall. This is clever as the instrument ‘playing’ the psychiatrist varies, but the woman is always portrayed by a bass drum as if she finds it difficult and effortful to provide answers. The surtitles also bring out points in their own right. When the ‘psychiatrist’ sings, they provide the full ‘version’ while she only trots out half of the words. This changes their meaning entirely, and suggests that the psychiatrist too needs help, which she does because she is the woman. When another of the women sings an ‘aria’ the surtitles do not highlight her main line, but rather the accompaniments and interjections of others.

The cast proves excellent, with the woman being played primarily by Gweneth-Ann Rand, but also Clare Presland, Susanna Hurrell, Emily Edmonds, Jennifer Davis and Lucy Schaufer (who also embodies the psychiatrist). Hannah Clark’s set feels appropriately sterile, encapsulating a room with no windows, two chairs and a table, while also presenting a white, clean-edged area that enables the ‘drama’ of the woman’s mindset, replete with light and shade, to be played out to the full.

Sam Smith, 25 May 2016

The Spectator

Thomas Adès bottles it in his new opera: The Exterminating Angel reviewed

For a truly original opera about troubled minds in troubled times, look to Philip Venables’s *4.48 Psychosis* that premiered at the Lyric Hammersmith

In Luis Buñuel’s 1962 film, the ‘exterminating angel’ of the title is a mystery illness. A debilitating virus — much worse even than man flu — that attacks the social immune system and shuts down your ability to act, to think, to be. It prevents you from remembering how to behave at middle-class dinner parties. You arrive at a friend’s house twice. You forget to leave. Open doors become terrifying, impassable geometric objects. Your handbag contains not keys but feathers and chicken legs. Occasionally it kills.

The bug is Buñuel’s metaphor for a society gripped by cowardice. Composers can catch it. Not Thomas Adès, though. There is bravery (insanity?) in him even attempting to adapt Buñuel’s pitch-perfect confection of social satire and surrealism. Not just because lightning rarely strikes twice (name me another adaptation of a masterpiece that is also a masterpiece) but also because the central theme is inertia. And composing an opera about inertia is a bit like dedicating a restaurant to the inedible, or a zoo to the stuffed. It’s awkward. Counterintuitive. And, initially, inspired.

How better to avoid operatic cliché — the hyperbole and hyperactivity — than to fashion activity out of inactivity. How better (in the wrong hands) also to induce narcolepsy. It is, then, a tightrope walk. But opera is a tightrope walk. Perversity is rewarded.

So we start somewhere contrary, almost conceptual. The entertainment will last for as long as this assortment of generals and doctors and nobs continues to be incapacitated. The less they do, the more that happens. In the first half, almost nothing happens. A piano is played. Sofas are lounged on. Slights are exchanged. Waltzing them along passive-aggressively, their sweaty-palmed subconscious: the orchestra.

With the plot self-propelling, dramatic energies are invested in bourgeois dynamics, the surface preoccupations psychoanalysed by a score periodically erupting with rage or lusciously, necrosexually, inching towards something end-of-days. Above ground, niceties and not-so-niceties. Coffee is served. Spoons are debated.

A battery of darkly sweet sounds (often with Latino accents), and a slithery ondes Martenot, are hurled at the guests, sending their voices shooting up — the only place they can survive. Or maybe this scaling into the stratosphere is an attempted escape. Orchestral ladders, however, become snakes.

Such is the sadism of the vocal score, you don’t immediately realise this is an all-star cast (Christine Rice, Iestyn Davies, Thomas Allen, John Tomlinson…). The work prohibits showing off. It also shouts what is meant to be whispered. In the film, as the tale turns feral, the voices turn inward, so that by the end it is hard to know what is being said and what is being dreamed. No possibility of confusing the two in this production. Vocally everything is bellowed; visually too. Legibility — in Hildegard Bechtler’s set designs, in Tom Cairns’ direction for Salzburg Festival — flattens Buñuel’s subliminal hints and winks.

And herein lies the biggest problem. Operification. Alterations to the original script that aid clarity also encourage dumbness. Arias are

inserted: mawkish, hysterical, melodramatic.

A Valkyrie-like final aria, egged on by an orchestra turned primal and Brucknerian, sung by the amazing Audrey Luna, shatters the spell fabulously. But the hyperbole that is so studiously avoided in the first part makes up for lost time in the gooey second. Things become messy and a bit ‘look at my Great British Opera’.

So ultimately Adès does succumb to the angel. He bottles it. He takes neither the satire nor surrealism anywhere near as far as he could or should. Be careful: the bug travels to the Royal Opera House next spring.

For a truly original take on the troubled mind in troubled times, look instead to Philip Venables’ reworking of Sarah Kane’s 4.48 Psychosis, premièred by the CHROMA Ensemble a few months ago at the Lyric Hammersmith. What Venables realises is that the frustrations of the paralysed — in this case the all-consuming debilitation of the suicidal — are best served not by fluency but by inconsistency. Estranged mental states require estranged music. So we are jerked, unpredictably, from hectoring Eislerian chases to percussive face-offs (between saws and drums and whips and hammers) to choral washes to taped duets to cheaply canned interludes.

Experimentation in the service of absolute emotional precision: Venables’ economical work is one of the most exhilarating operas in years, even while it gives voice to some of the darkest thoughts imaginable.

Igor Toronyi-Lalic, 6 August 2016

Bachtrack

Powerful and assured: 4.48 Psychosis at the Lyric Hammersmith

Philip Venables is certainly not one to choose the lighter themes on offer. Sexuality and violence are frequent concerns in his work, which rarely stays within the confines of music, instead often including text in various forms, image or movement, in order to address the topics Venables is drawn to. With 4.48 Psychosis, the first musical adaptation of the eponymous play by Sarah Kane, which is the culmination of a three-year programme run jointly by the Royal Opera and Guildhall School of Music and Drama, Venables could be said to have added clinical depression into the mix as well. However, the piece is much more than that, being a continuation of the composer’s work in finding novel connections between sound and text, particularly, and a strikingly good match of ‘libretto’ and composer.

The text includes a lot of dark, even black, humour, which sometimes seems to act as a defence mechanism employed by the author, which Venables and the director Ted Huffman exploited without hamming up the effect, and which certainly helped refresh the audience’s attention. Indeed, anyone expecting jokes to fall flat in such heavily textured text and music would be surprised at the amount of laughs the show got. One might only wonder whether these moments were not too concentrated in the first half of the show, leaving the second half at greater risk of losing the audience.

Kane’s text specifies no characters, and Venables opted for a line-up of six female singers, one of which acted as the main protagonist while another periodically slipped into the role of the psychiatrist. Their identical everyday costumes of jeans and a cardigan, coupled with the absence of any markedly dramatic action on the stage, served to heighten the sense of commonality; of the lines which were spoken and sung illustrating a general reality – rather than expressing the author’s experience, illustrating the need to express. This was taken further by the use of the voices in their many registers – sung, spoken, whispered, screamed, and, in particular, pre-recorded and spatialised across the theatre.

The lack of physical action mentioned above was certainly not a fault – the frequent use of projected text would have made it hard to concentrate on it in any case, though, given the highly sectionalised structure, one wonders why some of the more singer- and movement-centred sections didn’t make more dramatic use of the stage. The lighting, on the other hand, featured some very effective jump-cuts between various scenarios, with synchronised cuts in the sound, between the orchestra (led by Richard Baker with his standard precision and dedication to detail) and white noise or other non-musical sound.

Whenever the music made use of multiple layers, and particularly when these materials were somehow archetypal or reminiscent of other music, Venables’ clarity of conception as a composer really shone through. From lullabies through sad electric keyboard pop songs to the descending bass of Baroque laments that surfaced repeatedly, these musics were always tending towards the past; towards memory, and in connecting with our own memories of them, lent depth and empathy to the ‘character’ presenting them.

These moments were also repeatedly scored for a single voice and possessed clearer musical continuity, often then interrupted by contrasting material from the ‘chorus’ of the remaining singers. This enhanced the profusion of subjectivities mentioned above in a particularly poignant and effective manner. The least convincing part of the music were the freely composed contrapuntal lines weaving the six voices together. The counterpoint was strong between these and the pre-recorded spoken voices, but the vocal lines themselves tended to sound like filler.

The use of non-instrumental sound was another effective extension, though the rumbling drone used to excellent dramatic effect at the end of the show was perhaps a little over-used throughout. Recorded sound was also present, in the form of courageously quiet, banal background music in the doctor-patient scenes. These scenes were some of the strongest elements in the opera, particularly for being so clearly defined in opposition to the rest of the action.

Dramatically, this was one of the few moments with clear characters interacting. Musically, these characters were represented by two percussionists at either end of the stage, whose varied gestures corresponded in various ways with words rhythmically projected under them – sometimes at the level of words, sometimes syllables, sometimes just punctuation and at other times entire utterances. This provided a very rarefied context for some powerful dialogue – with not a word uttered until the last of these scenes, in which all aspects of it were developed concurrently and at a very fast pace, to great effect.

Despite its openness, Kane’s text is certainly not easy to adapt. And seeing a list of the formal devices used by Venables, it would be easy to think that these were used as crutches. But Venables’ opera is a very assured and crafted work, placing Kane’s words in a formalised and estranged context which manages not to make the emotions overwrought, but not downplaying them either.

Ian Mikyska, 26 May 2016

British Medical Journal

“It is not your fault”: 4.48 Psychosis—the opera

In the same month in which British journalist Sally Brampton died at age 60 after purportedly walking into the sea near her home on England’s south coast after decades of crippling depression, the Royal Opera House staged a new opera by composer Philip Venables at the Lyric Hammersmith. *4.48 Psychosis* is based on playwright Sarah Kane’s last work, completed shortly before she committed suicide by hanging herself in 1999 after a long history of clinical depression. She was 28.

The performances follow a three year residency for Venables at the ROH and Guildhall School of Music and Drama. This won’t be a bundle of laughs, you might think—but this is not to say that there aren’t elements of wonderful humour in the intelligent and intricate

musical score for six voices and 12 players—the dialogues between patient and doctor, enacted by two percussionists using different instruments alongside text projections, are one example.

The action takes place in a bleak consulting room with a claustrophobic atmosphere that resembles a prison at times with its stark lighting. Chairs are occasional props, and at some point a deluge of items of clothing rains down on the cast. The grey-clad female singers perform magnetically; their singing is superb and nuanced, and although the play does not specify one protagonist, we quickly understand who the "main" patient and the doctor are—and their interactions have to be among the most frustrating and heart-wrenching elements of the opera. On the one hand, a patient whose condition is not alleviated by any medication and who is increasingly desperate in her search for a solution to her state, and on the other, a psychiatrist, whose competence and sympathy, combined with her professional helplessness and ineffectualness, occasionally makes way for impatience and a desire to withdraw and get on with her personal life.

The shimmering score, the choreographed moves of the singers, and the (often projected) words work well together, in verses and prose, staccato rhythms, and rich polyphonic sounds. During moments of "silence," lighter music (muzak?)—probably recorded—was playing in the background, making me wonder whether this was somehow happening in the main character's mind. Or maybe in my own mind? The production was incredibly tense, and every crisis that the protagonist experienced seemed worse than the preceding one, her sense of isolation, anger, and hopelessness more acute, her withdrawal into her despair more final. She sings about a previous suicide attempt by taking an overdose of her multifarious medications; this had been unsuccessful.

In the audience, I sensed how it would end, what was going to happen, while at the same time hoping it wouldn't: the protagonist climbed on to a table and formed a noose, followed by blackout and curtains. It felt difficult to applaud after such an unremittingly bleak 90 minutes, but the performances and staging had been absolutely superb. The operatic format was an absolutely inspired choice as the words were rhythmical and music can convey emotions that words cannot, or convey them differently. Outstanding!

Birte Twisselmann, 3 June, 2016