

A New Kind of Opera

John Fallas



Left to right, Lucy Schauer, Susanna Hurrell, Calre Presland, Jennifer Davis, Emily Edmonds and Gweneth-Ann Rand. ©2016 ROH. Photograph by Stephen Cummiskey

Where does a composer begin, when planning a piece of music? With notes, one might imagine – a melody, or a chord – or with an idea about instrumental or vocal sound: the playing or singing that is going to bring the piece to life. For Philip Venables it is different. For several years now he has been concerned less with the singing voice than with the speaking voice, and with finding a place – and a reason – for that voice in contexts which can meaningfully be described as ‘music’ rather than, say, poetry or theatre (though they may be those things too).

This relative lack of interest in the voice as an instrument of song might seem an odd qualification for writing an opera. And yet it suggests a slantwise approach, one without preconceptions about ‘opera’ or, indeed, about ‘the voice’, which resonates with Venables’ chosen text – a ‘play’ with no named characters nor even, for the most part, clear dialogue – as well as with the deliberately blank slate with which he was asked to approach the writing of this ambitious piece.

The project has come about under the umbrella of a joint scheme piloted by The Royal

Opera and the Guildhall School of Music & Drama. The Doctoral Composer in Residence position at the Royal Opera House and the GSMD builds on the practice-and-reflection-based nature of the School's existing postgraduate composition programmes, and draws on the creative resources and inspirational environment of the Royal Opera House. The residency has given him opportunities to conduct workshops and experiment over the eighteen-month period leading to the work's premiere, as well as time to reflect on what sort of work might enable him best to realize his vision for a new kind of opera.

The question of a libretto – even if it was not going to be a conventional sung libretto – clearly arose early in this process, and Venables was surprised to find his thoughts not going in the direction he had anticipated they would. 'I spent a long time wanting to do an original piece and looking for a writer to collaborate with,' he said in a recent magazine interview, 'but eventually it dawned on me that Sarah Kane's *4.48 Psychosis* had almost everything I wanted.'

Alongside the incorporation of spoken voice, another recurring concern in Venables' work to date has been violence, whether directly thematized or more oblique. At perhaps the most literal end of this spectrum are the percussive thwacks that impel much of *The Revenge of Miguel Cotto* (a piece for two male singers and nine instrumentalists that Venables wrote in 2012), though even this vivid musical present tense gives way to a vein of reflective sadness as the work's narrative – a true story of revenge and honour between boxers – turns from action to contemplation and consequence. There is the submerged, sometimes surreally flaring violence of Simon Howard's poetry, which Venables has set three times, for a variety of ensembles, mixing voices, simple instrumental accompaniments and, in *numbers 91–95*, two tape recorders (here, the echo-chamber of memory is a feature right through the piece). The same combination of qualities recurs in an earlier operatic project, *The Schmirz*, after Boris Vian's 1959 play *Les Bâtitseurs d'empire*, which Venables describes as 'a violent, surreal comment on war and colonialism'. (This project is still in development, but its first visible trace can be heard in the short instrumental *Fight Music*, written in 2009 as a thirtieth-birthday present for the Endymion ensemble, of which Venables was artistic director from 2004 until stepping back in order to concentrate on the composition of the present opera.)

Does he see Kane's text as violent? 'Contrary to some readings of this piece we feel that it's not about blood and guts,' he says, 'but about inner conflict. [...] That huge conflict between wanting love and wanting happiness and not being able to find it.' He also stresses the way the body is constantly implicated in the struggles voiced by the text: the body as another site of conflict (both 'internal' and 'external'), of feeling not-at-home, of discomfort and confusion – about gender, for example, clearly a key concern of the play.

In terms of the transition to the opera stage, the six singers do not represent separate characters but might be understood as externalizations of the text's consciousness – of what Venables and director Ted Huffman call the 'hive mind', the simultaneously plural and divided protagonist of this polyvalent, often disconcertingly borderless text. In the four scenes where the presentation of text on Kane's page does imply dialogue, Venables avoids operatic convention in a different way, and dissolves the text/'character' nexus even further, with the speech rhythms 'performed' by two percussionists and the words themselves not heard but projected visually. (There is a similarity here to the two percussionists in *The*



Ted Huffman directs members of the cast in rehearsal.

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Revenge of Miguel Cotto, stationed at the back of the stage with punch-bags.)

On both counts – the splitting/recombining of an indeterminately single/multiple character and the voiceless embodiment of dialogue – the work seems concerned to make something as new, authentic, and both thematically and formally uninhibited, out of opera as Kane did out of theatre. It also recreates on its own terms the variety of register manifested by the original play text. ‘Nasty fucked-up computer game music: you lost,’ reads the performance direction to the instrumentalists in scene four, the first of two scenes where the only ‘words’ are the lists of numbers – two attempts, one failed, one successful, to count down from 100 in steps of seven – that constitute two sections of Kane’s script. Asking a patient to count down in this manner is a standard test for depression, but Venables treats it in TV gameshow style, with buzzers/bells for ‘right’ and ‘wrong’ answers. To listeners familiar with Venables’ previous work, these passages may also recall two of the three above-mentioned Simon Howard settings, *numbers 76–80: tristan und isolde* and *numbers 91–95*, both with texts drawn from a single long poem in 100 numbered sections. In Kane’s text as in Howard’s poetry, abstract frameworks summon forth and keep company with shards of vivid, sometimes unbearable reality.

Radical or experimental poetry (‘linguistically innovative’ poetry, as some of its practitioners prefer to call it, though this term might seem to downplay the compelling alterity of the thematic content as well as the language) has appealed to Venables consistently in recent years. *The Revenge of Miguel Cotto* was developed in collaboration with the poet S.J. Fowler. Another work – *Socialist Realism*, for speaking choir, ‘newsreader’ and solo violin – sets a text by a third London-based poet, Sean Bonney, whose fierce

post-punk, post-Rimbaud intelligence informs this furious/sad meditation on what the government and mayoralty have wreaked upon our city in the name of profit.

All of these pieces include elements that draw them away from the conventional 'setting' of text, so that in Venables' output to date the line between staged and concert music is not rigid. In other works different variables again are in play. In *Unleashed*, for example – a music/theatre piece for singer, five actors, tape and two instrumentalists, based on documentary recordings of gay men describing their sex lives – the instruments follow the rhythms and verbal cues of the spoken text, rather than having notated beats and bar lines. In the numbers pieces, by contrast, the spoken and theatricalized elements take place against the background of unobtrusive yet tightly controlled harmonic and rhythmic set-ups, whose simple, pragmatic effectiveness perhaps reveals the guiding influence of Venables' first composition teacher, Steve Martland, as well as Venables' own practical experience working with chamber ensembles as a programmer and artistic director. 4.48 *Psychosis* finds an intuitive middle way between these two approaches – the primacy of the musical and of the textual framework – just as it also dissolves the distinctions between spoken and sung voice which might have appeared central to Venables' earlier experiments in combining text and music. It is a brave and inclusive vision of opera, and an authentic staging of a brave and – for all its horrible intimacy with despair – richly textured, endlessly rewarding play.

John Fallas is a writer and editor with a special interest in the music of the 20th and 21st centuries. He works regularly for CD labels including NMC, Delphian and the French label aeon, and for performers including the Arditti Quartet, BBC Singers and BBC Symphony Orchestra.