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FULL CRITIQUES FOR 'INTO THE LITTLE HILL' November 2006 World Premiere featuring Anu Komsí, soprano

The Sunday Times

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There's gold under them hills

George Benjamin has reimagined the Pied Piper. Paul Driver is charmed

For George Benjamin, writing an opera has long been a goal. Now his quest for a libretto has ended. Opéra National de Paris and Ensemble Modern, under Franck Ollu, have just given the premiere at the Bastille opera house of *Into the Little Hill*, "a lyric tale in two parts for soprano, contralto and 15 players", to words by Martin Crimp.

The performances in the amphitheatre named after Messiaen, one of Benjamin's teachers, were as unusual in form as the work itself. Since *Into the Little Hill* lasts for less than 40 minutes, it was prefaced by Benjamin's *Viola, Viola*, for two violas, and *Three Miniatures for Solo Violin*, given on the set — Perspex catwalks, luminous rectangles, metal music stands, a bark floor — designed by Daniel Jeanneteau to accommodate players as well as singers. The instrumental pieces were part of an integrated drama; there were no breaks.

The keynotes of the new work are obliqueness and economy. Rather as the sonorous, Bartokian writing of *Viola, Viola* suggests the presence of more than two players, so the two singers conjure up a fuller cast: the forces needed for this unexpected retelling of the Pied Piper story. Straightaway, we hear them together as the Crowd, people living in the shadow of the Little Hill, clamouring for rats to be killed. Next, the contralto (the stylish, quite mannish-sounding Hilary Summers) takes the role of a minister seeking re-election, who happens to be well disposed to rats — his little daughter has one — and feels they should be tolerated in a city that "accepts all faiths/because we believe — intelligently believe/in nothing".

In the fourth of the brief scenes the soprano — Anu Komsí, whose capacity for top Ds Benjamin exploits with coloratura touches — plays a stranger appearing in the sleeping daughter's bedroom, who converses with the minister. We are told the stranger has no eyes, nose or ears. He has charmed his way in with music. He will remove the rats for money, but the minister must swear on his child that he will pay. During scene five, we may imagine the stranger setting to work as a long, symbolic bass-flute solo winds through a dialogue about rats between the minister's wife and child. In part two, duly re-elected, the minister is confronted by the stranger, but insists there was no extermination. The rats simply chose to leave; the music was "incidental". In revenge, the stranger lures the city's children into the hill, where the deeper they burrow, "the brighter his music burns".

Crimp's terse, slanted text is admirable for setting: rather like the stranger, it is self-effacing while making its presence felt. Musicalised, it creates a dramatic effect whose characteristic is that drama is always off stage, implicit, sublimated. This is the Pied Piper of Hamelin through the wrong end of a telescope. As in Brecht plays, action is presented rather than mimicked, and Benjamin may have been influenced by the ritualistic music-theatre of another of his teachers, Alexander Goehr. It is as almost as though drama has been sought out merely to revitalise ensemble writing, and perhaps the implication that music can no longer — as in traditional opera — engage life in any direct way is part of the parable: the serious composer may be socially redundant, may lack outward ears, but music is a nonetheless potent and even dangerous force, a kind of radioactivity.

Certainly, it was the eerie beauty and uncanny originality of the music that made the dominant impression on me. The scoring is remarkable — for a sort of "alienated" folk band including pairs of basset horns and cornets, a contrabass clarinet, a cimbalom and string players who double on banjo or mandolin. There are passages of ethereal delicacy, silken slowness, but these are contrasted with sudden fiercenesses, as in Benjamin's recent orchestral Palimpsests. Bass timbres are beguiling, the tutti sound is at once bizarre and delectable: I wanted more of it. There is a plan to bring the work to Liverpool in 2008, but it remains unconfirmed.

Into the Little Hill

Opéra Bastille, Paris

Andrew Clements

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[The Guardian](#)

For almost 20 years, George Benjamin has been thinking about composing an opera. In that time there have been plenty of rumours of him collaborating with leading playwrights, but it is only now that he has found the right person to work with: the British dramatist and translator Martin Crimp. What they have produced, the "lyric tale" *Into the Little Hill*, premiered under the banner of the Festival d'Automne in Paris, is as entrancingly beautiful as anything Benjamin has written.

It is a slender, deceptively simple piece, lasting only 40 minutes and scored for just soprano and contralto (Anu Komsis and Hilary Summers, both outstanding) with 15 instrumentalists from Ensemble Modern conducted by Franck Ollu. The piece has barely enough dramatic trappings to qualify even as music theatre and while it probably could be presented more lavishly than Daniel Jeanneteau's staging in the Opéra Bastille's amphitheatre, it is the very economy of means - the action is played out around the ensemble, with the two singers sharing the narration and playing all the roles with a minimum of props - that gives the work its elegance and poetic power.

Crimp's equally spare libretto retells the centuries-old story of the Pied Piper. A minister seeking re-election promises the people he will rid their country of its rats, even though he knows they do no harm. A stranger, who has no face, offers to lead the rats away in exchange for money. A bargain is struck and the rats disappear, but when the minister is re-elected he reneges on the deal, saying the money has been better spent on "barbed wire and education", and the stranger leads the children away to the light "inside the little hill".

If the political resonances are clear enough Crimp never labours them, while the deftness of Benjamin's vocal writing weaves it into a spell-binding piece of storytelling. Each role is effortlessly characterised: the minister's delivery clipped, matter-of-fact; the stranger's soprano lines spiralling ever higher. All are wrapped in the most luminous score, subtly coloured by basset horns, cornets and a cimbalom, and later by banjo and mandolin too, while the stranger's seductive music is given to a solo bass flute snaking through the textures.

If composing for the stage has opened up new areas of expression for Benjamin, the result is more ravishing than anyone could possibly have imagined.

www.webthea.com: Opéra/Classique

Into the Little Hill de George Benjamin et Martin Crimp "Frontière", est la dénomination que Gérard Mortier, directeur de l'Opéra National de Paris, a attribué à la sorte de laboratoire de recherche musicale installé dans les espaces de l'Amphithéâtre Bastille. Spectacles « frontières » donc qui se situent en bordure des formes connues pour explorer des formes à venir. Le dernier en date *Into the Little Hill*, mis en musique par le compositeur anglais George Benjamin, sur un texte de son compatriote Martin Crimp, s'est révélée une grande réussite, une heure de formidable densité musicale et d'émotion à fleur de peau.

Une musique qui raconte des histoires

Le thème de cet « opéra » qui n'en est pas un, s'inspire très librement de la légende du *Joueur de Flûte de Hamelin*. Pour qui n'a pas pris très sérieusement connaissance du programme et des intentions des auteurs il est pratiquement impossible d'en retrouver les traces. Le Festival d'Automne qui coproduit la production a l'habitude il est vrai de ne s'adresser qu'à des initiés. Mais le miracle ici vient justement d'une alchimie qui rend caduque l'obligation de comprendre. A elle seule, la musique de Benjamin raconte des histoires et celle de ce ministre qui, en vue d'élections prochaines, promet au peuple de le débarrasser des rats qui infestent la ville, tient davantage par la fascination de ses sonorités que par son anecdote.

Des courses ludiques entre tragédie et comédie

Les quelques surtitres anglais se contentent de situer les confrontations, « the minister and the crowd-le ministre et la foule », « le ministre et l'étranger », « le ministre et sa femme »... Sous direction de Franck Ollu, les musiciens de *l'Ensemble Modern* sont répartis sur un demi-cercle tapissé de copeaux roux, d'étroits praticables blancs sur lesquels se déplacent les deux cantatrices, s'avancent en direction du public. En ouverture, deux altistes (pour le duo *Viola, Viola*) puis un violon solo, d'une incroyable virtuosité (pour *Three Miniatures*), se livrent à des espèces de courses ludiques entre tragédie et comédie où pointe d'un bout à l'autre un humour authentiquement british. Puis apparaissent, pour le rôle du ministre, la contralto Hillary Summers en tailleur pantalon rouge, puis, en robe blanche, la soprano Anu Komsî, pour tous les autres personnages, l'étranger, la femme, l'enfant... Et cette petite formation, quasi immobile, mise en espace par Daniel Jeanneteau, va, une soixantaine minutes durant, exercer sur les oreilles et sur les yeux un véritable magnétisme. On en sort légèrement hypnotisé et pourtant ce n'est guère de l'opéra, pas même un oratorio que l'on vient de voir et d'entendre. Tout juste une cantate en noir et blanc d'une envoûtante beauté.

Polyphonies inventives et écriture bâtie à la serpe

George Benjamin, 46 ans, est l'une des figures majeures de la musique contemporaine anglaise. Francophile, amoureux de Debussy, élève et disciple de Messiaen il use d'une écriture musicale à la fois limpide et serrée, de polyphonies inventives où se croisent toutes les pratiques des musiques d'aujourd'hui, tonales et atonales. Sans commentaire, pourrait-on dire, s'accordant parfaitement à l'écriture dramatique bâtie à la serpe de Martin Crimp, le dernier des enfants terribles du théâtre anglais. Auquel le Festival d'Automne donne d'ailleurs un coup de chapeau sur les scènes de Théâtre Ouvert et du Théâtre de la Cité Internationale. Aux dernières nouvelles le mandat de Gérard Mortier a été prolongé jusqu'en 2009. Le temps de nous combiner encore quelques nouvelles belles pochettes surprises.

***Into the Little Hill* de George Benjamin et Martin Crimp par l'Ensemble Modern, direction Franck Ollu, scénographie, mise en scène Daniel Jeanneteau, avec Anu Komsu, soprano et Hillary Summers, contralto. Festival d'Automne à Paris - Amphithéâtre de l'Opéra Bastille, les 22,23,24 novembre à 20h, et, en tournée au Théâtre de Saint Quentin en Yvelines le 26 novembre à 16h**