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Die Vögel Braunfels

Cagliari

This amazing work had never before been performed in Italy and it was again Cagliari, in the best of traditions, to introduce such a novelty.

Braunfels describes his opera, composed between 1913 and 1919, as *ein lyrisch- phantastisches Spiel*, and, considering the enlightened intellectual and musical context in which the composer had lived until that moment and looking back to his musical heritage (even as far back as *Die Zauberflöte*) it is in this spirit that it should be interpreted. Giancarlo Corbelli's production tended to give a political slant (with specific reference to the war in Iraq, now, in Italian opera houses, practically a cliché). In Aristofanes' original version of the story, which describes the rapport between the individual and the state, this is uppermost, but in Braunfels it is the human, the ironic, the romantic and symbolical adventure which is given precedence.

Rich in mythological allusions, this opera remains an enigma, however. Is it (given the influence of Freud at the time) all a dream? Or does it represent the conflict between Good and Evil, between Inspiration and the Mundane, represented by the two mortals, Hoffegut and Ratefreund, who set out on a metaphorical journey seeking an escape from the vexations of their normal life on Earth and arriving in the kingdom of birds, a Paradise of peace and love ruled over by the Wiedhopf (the Hoopoe)? Hoffegut hopes to find true romance while Ratefreund is ambitious for power and dominance. Ratefreund convinces the birds to build their own city, midway between earth and heaven, excluding the annoying interference of the gods. The city is built, Ratefreund becomes emperor and dictates law, and Hoffegut courts the Nachtigall in an unsuccessful attempt at an amorous romance. Then Prometheus (dressed in camouflage) warns them that Zeus is only awaiting the right moment to intervene, which he does soon afterwards, in the form of a violent storm, destroying the city and scattering its inhabitants. The birds sing a hymn of praise to Zeus while Ratefreund and Hoffegut find themselves on earth once more; Ratefreund, unaffected, takes up his normal existence again but Hoffegut (Braunfels himself?) is a changed man, enriched by his mystical experience.

The different levels of the protagonists - human, bird, god - are indicated in the varied styles of the music, interwoven in a score of great complexity, of which the theatre orchestra, conducted by Roberto Abbado, gave an exemplary performance. The voices of other contemporary composers, especially Strauss (*Zerbinetta*) and Wagner (*Meistersinger*) can be clearly detected - this is Braunfels' first period - and there are passages of great beauty, especially at the beginning of the second act in the scene between Hoffegut and the Nachtigall, sung with incredible virtuosity and lightness by Katarzyna Dondalska. Lance Ryan tackled the difficult tenor part of Hoffegut with determination and Giorgio Surian was excellent in the baritone part of the ridiculous Ratefreund. The rest of the cast was made up of Markus Werba as Wiedhopf, Petri Lindroos as Prometheus and Annamaria Dell'Oste as the minxy Zaunschlupfer (Wren). The scenes and costumes, by Maurizio Balò, were disappointingly drab - a missed opportunity here - the birds in black with beaked masks, the Nachtigall in black with pink boa, while some stylised, metallic trees represented the bird kingdom. Sporadically falling stars lit up the night sky. In the newly built city Ratefreund is likened to Nero, and the flames of the burning city light up the backcloth.

Juliet Giraldi