

Obscure desires

JESSE SIMON

In the early decades of the twentieth century Franz Schreker was one of the most popular opera composers in the German-speaking world; however his Jewish ancestry put him at odds with the rise of National Socialism, and when he died in 1934 he had lived just long enough to be stripped of his teaching positions and to witness the disappearance of his works from the stage. It was not until the late 1980s that a serious reevaluation of Schreker's oeuvre started to take place; in the past decade, as many of his works celebrate their centenary, recordings of his operas have become easier to find and, increasingly, it has been possible to see them on stage.

The most recent of these revivals, a new production of *Der Schatzgräber* at the Deutsche Oper, was brought to life by director Christof Loy and conductor Marc Albrecht, the team who, in 2018, turned Korngold's *Das Wunder der Heliane* into both a surprise success and perhaps the most rewarding instalment in the Deutsche Oper's ongoing series of early twentieth century

'rediscoveries.' Although *Der Schatzgräber* is not without its flaws, Mr Loy's inspired staging was able to locate a credible drama beneath its diffuse narrative, while Mr Albrecht brought rapt intensity to Schreker's beguiling score.

The opportunity to hear more of Schreker's operas in recent years has revealed a composer capable of sustained opulence and lush orchestration, somewhat reminiscent of Strauss, but without the gloss of irony that can make Strauss' headiest moments more approachable to a modern audience. Rather his work seems closer in temperament to Zemlinsky, Korngold or Pfitzner: Schreker is rarely less than fully immersed in the gloomy romantic spirit of his era, and his music demands that its audience take seriously the magical properties of the night, the profound spiritual repercussions of physical love, and the constant proximity of death. If such naked sincerity can seem daunting, it requires only a conductor with confidence in the score to make Schreker's musical world not merely accessible but curiously inviting.

It is the subjects of Schreker's dramatic works that invariably prove more problematic. *Der*

Loy, Der
Schatzgräber
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**Berlin, viernes, 6
de mayo de 2022.**

Deutsche Oper
Berlin. Franz
Schreker: Der
Schatzgräber. Christof Loy, director.
Elisabet Strid (Els), Daniel Johansson (Elis),
Michael Laurenz (Der Narr), Thomas
Johannes Mayer (Der Vogt), Tuomas
Pursio (Der König), Doke Pauwels (Die
Königin), Clemens Bieber (Der Kanzler),
Michael Adams (Der Graf / Der Herold),
Joel Allison (Der Magister / Der
Schultheiss), Seth Carico (Der Junker),
Gideon Poppe (Der Schreiber), Stephen
Bronk (Der Wirt), and Patrick Cook
(Albi). Choir and Orchestra of the
Deutsche Oper Berlin. Marc Albrecht,
conductor

Schatzgräber was inspired by characters and settings from fairy tales, but Schreker was unable to tap into the primal simplicity that gives those stories their immortality. The opera features a grab-bag of archetypes drawn from obscure corners of Perrault and the Grimm brothers – a dying queen, a beautiful young woman of low birth forced to marry against her will, an inn-keeper, a court jester and a wandering minstrel with a magic lute that can locate buried treasure – but from these threads, Schreker wove a convoluted tale in which reversals and surprise reveal take the place of simple logic or dramatic development.



Franz Schreker: *Der Schatzgräber*. Marc Albrecht, conductor. Christof Loy, director. Deutsche Oper Berlin, May 2022. © 2022 by Monika Rittershaus.

One could argue that Schreker's unconventional mixture of fairy tale, nineteenth century melodrama and early twentieth century naturalism are a kind of precursor to the school of magic realism, except that his *libretti* often emerge as haphazard, with no clear guiding principle or argument. Els, the central figure in *Der Schatzgräber*, is a jewel thief and murderess as well as a fervent romantic waiting for her prince to come; although she is compelled to extraordinary acts in order to obtain the Queen's jewels, Schreker never tells us why they are so important, leaving his principal protagonist stranded without motive. The titular treasure hunter is less a character than a plot mechanism; only the fool, with his simple desire to enjoy married life, emerges as sympathetic, yet for much of the opera he is pushed to the sidelines.

It is to the immense credit of Christof Loy that he was able to fashion a compelling drama from such unpromising ingredients. Mr Loy's staging was set entirely in one room of a large chateau populated with bored aristocrats – the King, Queen and various courtiers at the 'loosened tie' stage of the evening – and their serving staff, which included Els, her father, her brutish suitor, and Albi, the faithful instrument of her machinations. Instead of shuttling back and forth between the world of the inn and the world of the court, the opera's two social orders were made to occupy a single space, a decision which rendered the story far more credible: if nothing else, it almost makes sense that a servant in the Queen's household would be in a position both to covet and acquire the royal jewels.

If Mr Loy was not quite able to fill all the gaps in the plot, he managed to craft individual scenes rich in incident and shaded with emotional ambiguity. The atmosphere of the chateau was one of sinister debauchery – both aristocrats and servants were engaged in various forms of licentious behaviour throughout the evening – and the stage was often busy with background action: in addition to the named parts, a group of actors appeared in silent roles (officers, maids, etc.) with the result that very few scenes took place without onlookers. The lack of privacy in even the most intimate scenes contributed to the oppressive unease that drove the drama. However Mr Loy never let the background details intrude upon the principal focus of the scenes, which gained their strength through well-defined characters and strongly delineated conflict.



Franz Schreker: *Der Schatzgräber*. Marc Albrecht, conductor. Christof Loy, director. Deutsche Oper Berlin, May 2022. © 2022 by Monika Rittershaus.

Although the cast list featured twelve named singing parts, much of the evening was carried by four vocal performances: the central couple of Els and Elis, plus the bailiff and the fool. If the bailiff was only a supporting role, Thomas Johannes Mayer invested the character with such malicious energy that he seemed to hang over the lovers even when he wasn't physically present. When he was on stage he was commanding, providing the surrounding action with a necessary focal point: his sinister flirtations with Els in the first act were only a shade removed from his later desire to expose her as the murderer; and when he returned triumphant mid-way through the fourth act, there was a savage directness in his delivery that cut through the chancellor's deferential interrogation.

The fool did not have as large a part, although Mr Loy was able to turn him into a more crucial presence by keeping him on stage for scenes in which he had no lines; however it was Michael Laurenz who transformed him into the opera's moral centre. With clear tone and expressive delivery, Mr Laurenz allowed the fool to emerge from the Prologue as perhaps the only figure who had managed to retain his integrity amidst the intrigues of the chateau. Yet the ironic, slightly mocking manner he used with the King was replaced, in his scenes with Els, with a longing that stood as perhaps the evening's most honestly rendered emotion.



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If Elis never quite held together as a character, Daniel Johansson ensured that his solo scenes were never lacking in vigour: his song in the second act may have been a ploy to delay his execution until the pardon had a chance to arrive, but it was delivered with no less ardour and sincerity than his captivating introductory scene in the first act. As Els, Elisabet Strid had by far the most challenging role, not merely for its vocal demands – which often involved having to project over Schreker's most frenzied full-orchestra passages – but also because it required an actress who could capture the sudden and frequent changes in mood and tone. Ms Strid came very close to reconciling Els' divergent extremes of the character: her reading, full of gestural nuance and supported by generous vocal authority, suggested an embattled survivor hurtling towards a moment of reckoning from which she knew there was no escape.

Marc Albrecht's affection for the score was apparent throughout the evening. Schreker held nothing back from the opera's most energetic passages – usually those involving the realization or admission of love – and Mr Albrecht presented those ecstatic peaks with all the necessary enthusiasm; even in the passages dictated more by plot than rapturous feeling, Mr Albrecht maintained a simmering sense of foreboding. Yet there was no better case for Schreker's artistry than the third act, in which plot was rendered subservient to mood, and the dangerous passion of the lovers culminated in a lengthy orchestral interlude that stood as perhaps the evening's finest moment.

Despite their best efforts, neither Mr Albrecht nor Mr Loy were able to make a convincing argument that *Der Schatzgräber* is a lost masterpiece. While Schreker's fall from grace was certainly undeserved, the plots, characters, emotions and philosophies from which his

operas are constructed belong so much to their own time and place that modern audiences must make generous mental allowances for attitudes that may now seem completely foreign. However if *Der Schatzgräber* fell short of the universality for which Schreker may or may not have been aiming, the Deutsche Oper's new production offered an ideal introduction to its many qualities.