

MUSIC

Review: In This One-Man Opera, It's All in His Head

By ANTHONY TOMMASINI SEPT. 8, 2016

Intriguing ambiguity permeates every element of David Lang's "The Loser," a mysterious 60-minute chamber opera. Or is it an austere staged concert work? Or an in-your-face monologue for baritone?

Adapted by Mr. Lang from Thomas Bernhard's 1983 novel, "The Loser" had its premiere on Wednesday at the Brooklyn Academy of Music's opera house in a boldly unconventional staging devised by Mr. Lang. The novel (originally published in German) is in the form of an interior monologue by an unnamed narrator. Through meandering, obsessive ruminations, the narrator recollects a life-turning (imagined) encounter in 1953, when he, then a piano prodigy, and Wertheimer, a friend and also a prodigy, studied with Horowitz at the Mozarteum in Salzburg. The young Glenn Gould was also a student. Gould's staggering genius has a transcendent impact on Wertheimer and the narrator, but ultimately undermines their identities. The narrator abandoned the piano, we learn. His monologue takes place years later after Wertheimer has committed suicide.

Another composer and librettist might have been tempted to flesh out the story into a drama with three characters. Mr. Lang embraces the severe intensity of the monologue format in his adaptation.

At the opera house, the audience sits only in the mezzanine. The narrator, here the baritone Rod Gilfry in a tour-de-force performance, dressed in a tuxedo, sings the entire work while standing on a platform some 20 feet above the floor. It's as if

he is suspended on a confined performing space right in front of the audience. (The set design is by Jim Findlay.) Through most of the piece the monologue is accompanied by just four players on bass, viola, cello and percussion (from *Bang on a Can Opera*, conducted vividly by Karina Canellakis), though during a dreamy final episode the pianist Conrad Tao, like an mystical Gould playing from some far-off realm, is seen in the distance (onstage) playing strangely quizzical music.

Gould was a galvanizing, distinctive artist, equal parts genius and eccentric. People have strong feelings about him. For Mr. Lang, the story Mr. Bernhard tells is “not at all about Gould, Horowitz or classical music,” as he writes in a program note, but about character development and perfectionism, about “how we justify our lives to ourselves” and “how we learn to appreciate beauty and become alienated from it at the same time.”

Mr. Lang captures the conflicted emotional currents of the story in his elusive, austere music. On the surface the narrator’s confessional, acutely detailed monologue hovers between long stretches of intense recitative and passages of lyrically enhanced arioso, sometimes poignant, sometimes chillingly detached. At first the instrumental music is mostly just slow, skittish, staccato notes. But these flecks become insistent rhythmic riffs and quasi-melodic patterns.

“The Loser,” as Mr. Lang suggests, explores the basic issues of how we fashion our identities. Still, the mingling of inspiration and envy is something aspiring artists in all fields have always grappled with. Mr. Bernhard’s choice of Gould as the talent that triggers suicidal thoughts in Wertheimer and bitter self-abnegation in the narrator was fascinating. Gould’s playing was always controversial. Yet, with its uncanny clarity, even at breathless tempos, and the purposefulness behind every note, Gould did seem the definition of a possessed genius.

In a dark, oddly smug passage of Mr. Lang’s piece, we learn the origin of the title “The Loser,” which was Gould’s flippant nickname for Wertheimer, who is always “losing out.” Gould dubbed the narrator the “philosopher.” All the recollections follow Wertheimer’s suicide. “After Gould’s death,” the narrator explains, Wertheimer “was ashamed to be alive.”

Mr. Lang asks a lot of his audience in “The Loser,” an unrelenting monologue. Yet the score is a model of how music can animate words. The text is set with impressive clarity, and Mr. Gilfry sings every phrase with crisp diction and dramatic point, delivering phrases with virile energy, sudden bluster, or, during vulnerable moments, an aching confusion that takes you by surprise. He is becoming the singer of choice for new American operas, after his triumph as Walt Whitman in the premiere of Matt Aucoin’s powerful “Crossing” in Boston last year.

During the final scene of “The Loser,” the narrator recalls visiting the room where Wertheimer lived after giving up the piano. He had devoted himself to writing a book about his encounter with Gould, but wound up burning the manuscript. The narrator puts on Gould’s recording of Bach’s “Goldberg” Variations. The music Mr. Lang wrote for the gifted Mr. Tao in this haunting scene is no Bach pastiche, but a cosmic rumination, with melodic fragments, circling inner voices and hazy harmonies. It’s at once restless and meditative; and, true to the entire work, engrossingly ambiguous.

“The Loser” runs through Sunday at the Brooklyn Academy of Music, 718-636-4100, bam.org.

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