

Pascal DUSAPIN

Perelà The Work of a Consummate Artist

It is now obvious with Pascal Dusapin's fourth opera *Perelà, Homme de fumée*, which will be premiered in Paris in February 2003, that here is a composer able to tackle opera head-on, thus adding a promising new work to the stage repertoire. Following the first three passionate stage works written in an original and very personal operatic vein during his formative years, *Perelà* matches up to the maturity of the musician and the large format required by the genre, taking a more prosaic stance as a work directly inspired by its subject matter.¹ Dusapin points out that he began writing it after reading Aldo Palazzeschi's book *Il Codice di Perelà* [*Perelà's Code*] which had a profound effect on him. This fabulous novel – fabulous in the sense that it is fable that directs its development – provided the composer with unusual literary and philosophical material via the tale told by a character who is initially totally foreign to the world but then suddenly becomes closely bound up with it, adulated and then discarded. Palazzeschi's Man of Smoke is a Christ-like figure, a true operatic hero, in that all roles tend towards him. He is also a hero at the bottom of an abyss since although his word is taken, it also furnishes a pretext for all other words.

The book was published in 1911, and having taken the important decision to retain the language (the opera is sung in Italian), its grammar and sentence structure, all of which form an integral part of Palazzeschi's style, Dusapin himself undertook its adaptation. This adaptation is therefore more of a reduction, "an excision", to use the composer's words, than a rewriting. The style is the substance, encompassing the theatrical qualities of the novel, since by far the majority of the chapters are in the form of scenes with dialogue, so that an extravagant number of characters are assembled around the Man of Smoke. Of the sixteen chapters of the original book therefore the composer retained ten, which structure the novel and organise the dramatic content around the Man of Smoke, from the arrival at court, the tea, God and the ball through to Perelà's trial and finally to the famous Code.² These situations, which are almost always of a surrealist nature, blend outrageous anachronisms into an atmosphere of decadent monarchy, assembling numerous singular and eccentric characters. This naturally leads to a rich use of the voices.

¹. In *Romeo & Juliette* (1989) it was the libretto, by Olivier Cadiot, that threw the very genre into question; *Medeamaterial* (1992) pitched the genre against the idea of the myth revisited using techniques borrowed from baroque opera; while *To Be Sung* (1994) questioned the performance with the American artist James Turrell. Other works, although not destined for the stage, also display undeniable dramatic traits, such as *Niobé* (1983) and *La Melancholia* (1992).

². All references are to the French translation used by Pascal Dusapin, published by Éditions Allia, Paris © 1993.

First of all, the chorus takes on a multiple role, supplying the numerous crowd effects – sung, spoken or chanted (the chorus can also be reinforced by extras should the producer so decide) – as

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well as highly differentiated minor roles. In the first chapter, for example, seven singers represent a group of photographers, while in the Tea Scene (in the second chapter), fourteen female singers from the chorus play parts central to the development. So both in stage and voice terms the chorus occupies a fundamental role throughout the opera, destined to represent the effects of movement, proliferation, density and collective fervour or astonishment. Pascal Dusapin's music makes use of a wide palette of expression, matching the vocal technique within the scope of European operatic choruses.

The solo voices are organised in three levels: the title role, principal roles and secondary roles.

The six secondary roles, first of all, divide into two, with some roles being sung and others spoken or silent.

- three characters with varying functions: the King, a silent role, to be played by an actor; the Parrot, which can be taken by a singer from the chorus or an actor; and the Young Girl, an entirely new invention on the composer's part, which has nothing to do with the action, to be played by a flautist with acting ability. As is so often the case with Pascal Dusapin, this last role builds a bridge between the musical and the dramatic situations.³
- the three other roles are sung by more classical voices, representing three characters, namely, the roles of the banker Rodella and the philosopher Pilone (two baritones with a flexible range but somewhat anonymous), and the part of the Archbishop, sung by a falsetto voice, as if to emphasise the caricatural side to the role.

Next, the principal roles concern eleven different characters, and the score is so arranged that they can be sung by a minimum of four singers. The producer may, if preferred, assign each part to a different singer, or distribute the roles to a different number of performers, resulting in a certain ambiguity giving rise on occasion to a specific dramaturgical effect (for example, a new meaning can be adduced from the transformation of the Poor Old Lady into the Marchioness di Bellonda). The four singers must therefore include two female voices of opposing character, and two men's voices also selected for their variety. On the mature side, we have the warm, generous voice of the confident woman (the contralto playing the Marchioness Olivia di Bellonda who, in the first chapter, takes the

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part of the Old Lady), contrasting with an immoderately hysterical, grand operatic coloratura (the Queen and, in chapter 6, Alloro's Daughter). The two baritone-basses may take on the roles of the two King's Guards, the Chamberlain, the Minister, the Valet, Alloro and the President of the Tribunal.

Finally the title role should be played by a high tenor who should also have a good lower register. The "asexual" voice, as suggested by the enigmatic character whose voice has no prior constructs, and with a wide tessitura bereft of any specific facets, provides the dramatic key to the work.

The wide-ranging choice of voices in *Perelà, Homme de fumée* is further matched in the orchestra. In the pit there are three sets of percussion instruments and a piano, all of them instruments that Pascal Dusapin has not, until now, used in his operas. The contrabass clarinet, the double bassoon and numerous mutes for the trumpets and trombones are other unusual features contributing to the particular colour of this sizeable orchestra (ninety players). On stage meanwhile, there is a positive organ associated with the Archbishop and, in the second part of the work, a group of ten musicians in the style of a brass band (including the piccolo, saxophones, cornets, bass drum and side drum).

Pascal Dusapin further says that it was not so much his desire to work on the form as the humanist dimension of Palazzeschi's novel that inspired him to compose *Perelà*. This dimension alone would not suffice to produce such a work, however, evolving over a period of over two hours, if the composer had not already acquired a genuine understanding of the musical and vocal means, the casting and the architecture of the work. By responding quite precisely to the usual means employed in opera, and by wiping out all traces of the form, this fourth work in the genre by Pascal Dusapin makes room for inspiration, creating music that is both free and definitively operatic.

³ . In *Romeo & Juliette*, the action is "organised" by an on-stage clarinetist and an actor-narrator; in *Medeamaterial* Médée's voice is subdivided from time to time into a vocal quartet; while in *To Be Sung*, an announcer, played by an actor, represents space and rhythm during the performance.

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translated by Mary Criswick