

Monday, August 12, 8 p.m.
Florence Gould Auditorium, Seiji Ozawa Hall
TANGLEWOOD MUSIC CENTER FELLOWS
GEORGE BENJAMIN, conductor

GEORGE BENJAMIN
Written on Skin
(2009-12; U.S. premiere)
Opera in Three Parts
after the anonymous 13th century *razo*
“Guillem de Cabestanh—Le Coeur Mangé”
Text by Martin Crimp

Concert performance

Agnès LAUREN SNOUFFER, soprano
Protector EVAN HUGHES, bass-baritone*
Angel 1/Boy AUGUSTINE MERCANTE, countertenor
Angel 2/Marie TAMMY COIL, mezzo-soprano
Angel 3/John ISAIAH BELL, tenor

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grant from the Geoffrey C. Hughes Foundation and the
Tanglewood Music Center Opera Fund.**

*Guest artist

George Benjamin (b.1960)
***Written on Skin, Opera in Three Parts* (2009-12)**

SYNOPSIS by Martin Crimp

Part One

I. Chorus of Angels

“Erase the Saturday car-park from the market place—fade out the living—snap back the dead to life.”

A Chorus of Angels takes us back 800 years, to a time when every book is a precious object “written on skin”. They bring to life two of the story’s protagonists: the Protector, a wealthy and intelligent landowner “addicted to purity and violence,” and his obedient wife—his “property” —Agnès. One of the angels then transforms into the third protagonist—“the Boy”—an illuminator of manuscripts.

II. The Protector, Agnès and the Boy

In front of his wife, the Protector asks the Boy to celebrate his life and good deeds in an illuminated book. It should show his enemies in Hell, and his own family in Paradise. As proof of his skill the Boy shows the Protector a flattering miniature of a rich and merciful man. Agnès distrusts the Boy and is suspicious of the making of pictures, but the Protector overrules her and instructs her to welcome him into their house.

III. Chorus of Angels

The Angels evoke the brutality of the biblical creation story— “invent man and drown him,” “bulldoze him screaming into a pit”—and its hostility to women—“invent her/strip her/blame her for everything.”

IV. Agnès and the Boy

Without telling her husband, Agnès goes to the Boy's workshop to find out "how a book is made." The Boy shows her a miniature of Eve, but she laughs at it. She challenges the Boy to make a picture of a "real" woman, like herself—a woman with precise and recognisable features—a woman that he, the Boy, could sexually desire.

V. The Protector and the visitors—John and Marie

As winter comes, the Protector broods about a change in his wife's behaviour. She hardly talks or eats, has started to turn her back to him in bed and pretends to be asleep—but he knows she's awake and can hear her eyelashes "scrape the pillow/like an insect."

When Agnès' sister Marie arrives with her husband John, she questions the enterprise of the book, and in particular the wisdom of inviting a strange Boy to eat at the family table with Agnès. The Protector emphatically defends both Boy and book, and threatens to exclude John and Marie from his property.

VI. Agnès and the Boy

The same night, when Agnès is alone, the Boy slips into her room to show her the picture she asked for. At first she claims not to know what he means, but soon recognises that the painted image of a sleepless woman in bed is a portrait of herself, her naked limbs tangled with the covers. As they examine the picture together, the sexual tension grows until Agnès offers herself to the Boy.

Part Two

VII. The Protector's bad dream.

The Protector dreams not only that his people are rebelling against the expense of the book, but also, more disturbingly, that there are rumours of a secret page—"wet like a woman's mouth"—where Agnès is shown "gripping the Boy in a secret bed."

VIII. The Protector and Agnès

The Protector wakes up from the dream and reaches out for his wife. She, however, is standing at the window watching black smoke in the distance, as the Protector's men burn enemy villages. She asks her husband to touch and kiss her—but he's disgusted at being approached in this way by his wife and repels her, saying that only her childishness can excuse her behaviour. She angrily refuses to accept the label "child"—and tells him that if he wants to know the truth about her, he should go to the Boy: "Ask him what I am."

IX. The Protector and the Boy

The Protector finds the Boy in the wood "looking at his own reflection in the blade of a knife." He demands to know the name of the woman who "screams and sweats with you/in a secret bed"—is it Agnès? The Boy, not wanting to betray Agnès, tells the Protector that he is sleeping with Agnès' sister, Marie—and conjures up an absurd scene of Marie's erotic fantasies. The Protector is happy to believe the Boy, and reports back to Agnès that the Boy is sleeping with "that whore your sister."

X. Agnès and the Boy

Believing that what her husband said is true, Agnès furiously accuses the Boy of betraying her. He explains he lied to protect her—but this only makes her more angry: it wasn't to protect her, it was to protect himself. If he truly loves her then he should have the courage to tell the truth—and at the same time punish her husband for treating her like a child. She demands that the Boy—as proof of his fidelity—create a new, shocking image which will destroy her husband's complacency once and for all.

Part Three

XI. The Protector, Agnès and the Boy

The Boy shows the Protector and Agnès some pages from the completed book, a sequence of atrocities which make the Protector increasingly impatient to see Paradise. The Boy is surprised: he claims that these are indeed pictures of Paradise here on earth—doesn't the Protector recognise his own family and property? Agnès then asks to be shown Hell. The Boy gives her a page of writing. This frustrates Agnès because, as a woman, she hasn't been taught to read. But the Boy goes, leaving Agnès and her husband alone with the "secret page."

XII The Protector and Agnès

The Protector reads aloud the page of writing. In it the Boy describes in sensuous detail his relationship with Agnès. For the Protector, this is devastating, but for Agnès it's confirmation that the Boy has done exactly as she asked. Excited and fascinated by the writing, indifferent to his distress, she asks her husband to show her "the word for love."

XIII Chorus of Angels and the Protector

The Angels evoke the cruelty of a god who creates man out of dust only to fill his mind with conflicting desires, and "make him ashamed to be human". Torn between mercy and violence the Protector goes back to the wood, and—"cutting one long clean incision through the bone"—murders the Boy.

XIV The Protector and Agnès

The Protector attempts to reassert control over Agnès. She is told what to say, what she may or may not call herself—and, sitting at a long dining-table, is forced to eat the meal set in front of her to prove her "obedience." The Protector repeatedly asks her how the food tastes and is infuriated by her insistence that the meal tastes good. He then reveals that she has eaten the Boy's heart.

Far from breaking her will, this provokes a defiant outburst in which Agnès claims that no possible act of violence—"not if you strip me to the bone with acid"—will ever take the taste of the Boy's heart out of her mouth.

XV The Boy/Angel 1

The Boy reappears as an Angel to present one final picture: in it, the Protector takes a knife to kill Agnès, but she prefers to take her own life by jumping from the balcony. The picture shows her as a falling figure forever suspended by the illuminator in the night sky, while three small angels painted in the margin turn to meet the viewer's gaze.

NOTES

"What can an opera do for us today? Very simple I think: move you... enchant... stir you... thrill you... just like four hundred years ago except we have to find new ways of doing it."

For his latest project, the British composer George Benjamin was facing a major challenge: how to make the historically-loaded opera genre relevant to a 21st century audience? The composing process for *Written on Skin* lasted 26 months and Benjamin confessed that during these years, his existence had been reduced to its simplest functions: "all I did was compose this piece. I stopped conducting, I stopped teaching virtually, I stopped travelling. I almost stopped existing as a human being. I just had an extremely enclosed and very simple life of working seven days a week, every week on this piece and this was completely enveloped by it and obsessed by it and that only came to an end the very day I wrote the last note. In the end it's very strange because you are completely enveloped in a work and every single bar seems impossible to write until you do manage to write it and then the piece is finished. And then it doesn't feel like it belongs to me anymore. And the piece sort of exists by itself."

The new opera was commissioned by the Festival d'Aix-en-Provence (where it was premiered in July 2012), De Nederlandse Opera (Amsterdam), the Théâtre du Capitole (Toulouse), the Royal Opera House Covent Garden London, and the Teatro del Maggio Musicale Fiorentino. George Benjamin decided to work with the renowned playwright Martin Crimp, whose plays usually evoke contemporary violence exposed with cruelty and humor while abandoning the classical narrative conventions. It is Crimp's use of language that initially attracted Benjamin, which he describes in these terms to *The Guardian's* Alan Rusbridger: "concise and quite hard and extremely economical and fantastical as well, very imaginative". Their first collaboration took place in the mid-2000s and produced the forty-minute long "lyric tale" *Into the Little Hill* (a reinterpretation of *The Pied Piper of Hamelin*) for fifteen instrumentalists and two singers. Benjamin and Crimp seem to profess their faith to their art through the character of The Stranger who sings: "With music I can open a heart/as easily as you can open a door/and reach right in."

The authors had only one guideline for the present project, namely: that the theme should be in some way related to the Occitan area of Provence. Martin Crimp then worked on an 800-year-old *razo* called *Guillem de Cabestanh—Le Coeur Mangé* ("The Eaten Heart"). A *razo*, from the Provençal word for "reason" or "explanation," is a short prose piece that relates the circumstances under which specific lyrics of a troubadour song were composed. In its original form, the story here was about a troubadour's love affair with the wife of the king for whom he was invited to perform. As Benjamin and

Crimp did not want to repeat the idea of having a musician at the center of the story, they made the troubadour an illuminator. Benjamin summarizes the plot as follows: "It's about an autocratic, powerful, potentially violent protector. On discovering the affair he kills the illuminator and serves up his heart for his wife to eat. She defies him by telling him that it's the most delicious thing that she's ever tasted and nothing could ever take the wonder of this taste from her mouth." ("George Benjamin: A Life in Music," *The Guardian*, 10 May 2012). The horrible theme of the "eaten heart," with its implied theme of guilty love, vengeance, transgression of moral and social rules, as well as primal taboos, could be of Celtic origin. It has been used several times in the history of literature in various genres including poetry, theater, novels (Boccaccio, Sade, Stendhal, Barbey d'Aureville and Ezra Pound), and it can also be found in Punjabi folk-tales.

Nonetheless, Benjamin faced a fundamental challenge with the opera genre: "In the 21st century, opera appears to be rather artificial unlike the movies for instance. I think it's necessary to establish and acknowledge that artificiality. And once that's done in a very simple way then the audience, I think, can react in a much more spontaneous and emotional way towards what's being told." In order to achieve this artificiality and to use it for dramatic effect, Martin Crimp composed a poetic and highly allegorical text (a word he prefers to "libretto" in this case). The piece is divided in three acts and fifteen short scenes that address that challenge. Among the techniques used to achieve this "unnaturalness," Crimp uses the "distanciation" wherein both viewers and actors are detached from the characters rather than identifying with them, a method developed by Berthold Brecht in the 1920s and 1930s. The text of *Written on Skin*, includes the frequent repetitions of phrases such as "said the boy" or "said the woman," a reminder for the audience that what is seen and heard is but a representation of characters in an opera composed before them. Emphasizing this typification, two of the three main characters are simply referred to as "The Protector" and "The Boy" throughout the entire piece, as if to reinforce the impression that they merely exist as archetypes in this opera. "The Woman" however becomes "Agnès" at the very end of the first act, when her sensuality is awakened by the young artist, and she and The Boy succumb to their passion. Crimp also blurs the viewers' notion of time, and the plot seems to operate on several levels simultaneously, superimposing the medieval times with today's reality. The audience is constantly shifted from past to present and the scenes highlighting the art of manuscripts alternate with allusions to the chrome and aluminum of airports, highways and parking spaces where markets once stood. Supernatural characters are yet another reminder of the distance between the Middle Ages and today, and they are used as commentators and as enablers of the action (for example when they warn The Protector of Agnès' infidelity). These angels also double as characters of the opera (The Boy, Agnès' sister and her husband) and as stage-helpers placing the other characters on stage and even dressing them in the course of the performance.

George Benjamin evoked the period when he started to work on *Written on Skin*: "I went to see a 12th century original manuscript at the British Library and the pictures are of a beauty that remains extraordinary today. And I tried at certain points in the opera to capture the beauty of these illuminations and in sound. And that means using some unusual timbres to match the cobalt and the gold and all the different colours that the painters then would have used." It comes then as no surprise that the biggest influence on Benjamin's music, known for the richness of its colors, has always been from France. He is a staunch admirer of Claude Debussy ("the best notes ever written") and he has been compared by critics to Maurice Ravel for his perfectionism and the precision of his writing. His mentor, Olivier Messiaen, is another composer known for his mastery of *couleurs*. Olivier Messiaen once described Benjamin as his best and favorite student, stating that: "His sense for tone color, harmony and rhythm is remarkable and the form is absolutely masterful. (...) He knew about harmony and orchestration and he had an exceptional ear". The impact of Olivier Messiaen's influence on Benjamin is probably best summoned by Pierre Boulez: "George Benjamin always had a good ear. (...) As a student of Messiaen's, I am sure he was taught to listen or at least be capable of sharpening his sense of hearing. (...) The master's influence is visible at a more fundamental level: he instilled in him a strong sense of how to control one's work as a composer."

This quest for perfection has contributed to Benjamin's reputation for fastidiousness: his production is scarce, as each project requires an incommensurable amount of time and energy to obtain something he has "never done before, something that has never been done before by anyone." For *Written on Skin*, Benjamin obviously refused to resort to clichés and the easy solution of merely imitating medieval music. He dared to use archaisms such as pure intervals between the voices (typical of music from the Middle Ages), as well as "old" and typified instruments like mandolins, the bass viola da gamba heard as an *obbligato* during the seduction scene, and the glass harmonica which brings a sense of eerie sensuality. Another archaism present in *Written on Skin* is the rare use of the countertenor as the young artist, The Boy, a voice that Benjamin finds "somehow supernatural, even mythical—as if from another world."

Benjamin requires an important orchestra—not so much for thundering fortissimo, as tuttis are rare or rather limited to interludes and connecting scenes, not unlike the way Alban Berg uses the orchestra in his opera *Wozzeck*—but rather to accompany the vocal line with subtle combinations of timbres. Since the art of illustration is at the center of the action, this provides the appropriate color to the scenes, as in Claude Debussy's *Pelléas et Mélisande*. Despite the large number of instruments, with a full array of percussion including steel drums, cowbells, as well as maracas, pebbles, guiro and even a typewriter, self-restraint and clarity are two essential virtues used to serve Crimp's text and convey absolute dramatic tension sometimes with the softest sound. Each word seems embedded in a score meticulously written with "just the right amount of notes," to paraphrase another famous opera composer; the text is perfectly intelligible and singers don't have to scream to be heard.

Reconciling tonality and atonality, simplicity and complexity, modernity of the musical language and concepts of classical harmony, far from any academicism or postmodern easiness, *Written on Skin* from George Benjamin and Martin Crimp is a work of gripping tension felt from the first note. This is one of the first operatic masterworks of our young century and, in the course of its short existence, has already been acclaimed by critics and enjoyed tremendous success in several European cities.

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Canada-born Jean-Pascal Vachon is a freelance musicologist currently living in Vienna, Austria. He regularly gives lectures on music, writes liner notes for BIS Records and gives music history courses at Webster University in Vienna, where he also works as a full-time academic advisor.