

PER BOYE HANSEN

Artistic Director of the National Theatre Opera and the State Opera

opera

The State Opera in Flames!

A Don Juan tale as told by Calixto Bieito

As a part of the *Musica non grata* cycle, the State Opera will present a Czech version of the surrealist opera *Flammen* (Flames) by Erwin Schulhoff, for the first time since its world premiere in Brno in 1932. On this occasion, the National Theatre team reconstructed the original Czech libretto by Karel Josef Beneš. This unusual Don Juan tale will be told by Calixto Bieito, the musical side of the production was entrusted to Jiří Rožeň. For the first time, State Opera will burst in *Flames* on Sunday 12 June.

"I was not sure if I could ever completely understand this work, but I felt that I would be able to fill it with my own imagination," **Calixto Bieito** said when asked about his first impression of *Flammen* by Schulhoff. In his interpretation of the work, he openly draws on his enchantment with Spanish surrealism, especially the films by Louis Buñuel. "*Flammen* is a work that allow us to speak of darkness, emptiness inside a man, images appearing in our dreams, the passing of life into death, of seduction, desire and love. It is an opera breathing the absolute freedom of our imagination," he added.

Twenty-nine years old at that time, **Erwin Schulhoff** started working on his only opera having just returned from Germany to Prague, the city of his birth. It was **Max Brod**, who introduced him to the sensual stage narrative poem *Don Juan* by **Karel Josef Beneš**, which became the basis for the libretto of *Flammen*. The original libretto was written by Karel Josef Beneš but, being a native German speaker, Schulhoff composed music to a German translation by Max Brod. He kept working on the opera with interruptions until 1929, in years of his enchantment with jazz and dadaism – both of which can be clearly heard in *Flammen*. "The opera immediately draws your attention by its structure with significant purely symphonic episodes. Singing, on the other hand, is sparser and the chorus only has a single scene to perform," said the conductor **Jiří Rožeň**. "Also the way, in which Schulhoff combines various styles, is worth mentioning. His music ranges from late romanticism to expressionism with overtones of impressionism suddenly switching to a jazz scene or a nuns' psalmody," he added. On several occasions, Schulhoff also intentionally refers to Mozart's *Don Giovanni*. Nevertheless, there are great differences between *Flammen's* Don Juan and his Mozart's counterpart. While Don Giovanni dies, Don Juan in *Flammen* is doomed to live forever. "The plot of the opera develops basically as a sequence of images, not unlike scenes being cut in a film. This allowed Schulhoff and Beneš to organize the individual scenes in various sequences, adding parts into scenes or writing new scenes altogether," said **Jitka Slavíková**, the dramaturge of the National Theatre Opera and the State Opera, who reconstructed the Czech libretto by Karel Josef Beneš from original documents. It was Beneš himself, who

hastily inscribed his original text to the piano reduction of the opera after the Land Theatre (Zemské divadlo) in Brno showed interest in presenting the work in world premiere in 1931. There was almost no time to adapt the original Czech version to the score and major changes were made even after the premiere on 27 January 1932. "Schulhoff and Beneš agreed to divide the work into three parts and to do other changes. A brand new scene, *Storm*, was added to the second act, between the scenes *Dialogue* and *Dialogue with the sea*," Jitka Slavíková elaborated.

There is no final authorized version of the libretto incorporating all the changes and additions. Hence, a unique opportunity presented itself, namely, to reconstruct the full libretto from all sources available: three piano reductions, the autograph and score copy, as well as several preserved manuscripts and prints of the libretto. It took several months to reconstruct the libretto. Another major task before the creative team of the National Theatre Opera was to adapt the score to the reconstructed libretto, as the singers' parts had to be adapted to the Czech text. The upcoming premiere of *Flammen* at the State Opera will present the full version of the work, including the additional scene *Storm* and parts with Marguerite and commedia dell'arte characters.

Erwin Schulhoff and Karel Josef Beneš shared not only their work on *Flammen* but also a tragic fate during the Second World War. For being a member of the anti-Nazi resistance, Beneš was sentenced to death with the sentence later mitigated to imprisonment in the inhuman conditions of several concentration camps. Erwin Schulhoff never saw the end of the war: being a Soviet citizen (he gained Soviet citizenship in 1941), he was deported to the Wülzburg internment camp in Bavaria, where he died of tuberculosis on 18 August 1942.

"*Flammen* is an extraordinary work of an extraordinary composer. In my opinion, Schulhoff was one of the great authors of his time. His influence on his contemporaries was deep but he never really got the recognition that he deserved. His only opera is a fascinating work presenting a new take on the famous Don Juan myth," said **Per Boye Hansen**, the Artistic Director of the National Theatre Opera and the State Opera. In Czech debuts, the Ukrainian tenor **Denys Pivnitskyi** (Don Juan) will star in the lead role accompanied by the Norwegian mezzosoprano **Tone Kummervold** (La Morte) and the Ukrainian soprano **Victoria Khoroshunova**, holder of the Maria Callas Award, who will sing the triple role of Donna Anna, Woman and Nun. In addition to six performances at the State Opera during June and November 2022, the opera will be also introduced at the Janáček Brno International Music Festival.

Musica non grata is a project prepared with the financial support of the **Embassy of the Federal Republic of Germany in the Czech Republic**. The National Theatre Opera would like to thank the **National Museum – Czech Museum of Music, the Museum of Czech Literature** and the **Moravian Museum** in Brno for providing precious visual materials, documents and sheet music for the opera *Flammen* and the artistic legacy of Erwin Schulhoff and Karel Josef Beneš.

Flammen sheet music with a German translation of the libretto was published by Schott Music in 1994.

Denys Pivnitskyi

"Don Juan is a unique role because you can find everything in his character: child, father, brother, friend, enemy, a guy that takes advantage of people. He is himself like a small universe. It is one of the most passionate roles that I have ever worked on."

Tone Kummervold

"Schulhoff's music is very 'theatrical', always inspiring and bursting with ideas. I just love it when jazz orchestra starts playing all of a sudden, I like the spontaneity, with which the music completely changes unexpectedly, moving like a giant wheel turning with tremendous force. But what do I like best about Schulhoff's music? How easy it is to let it guide you into the word that he wants you to enter."

Victoria Khoroshunova

"I play several women in the opera and their story is one of inner solitude. What makes them so unpleasant? Why do they die or kill? Because there is nothing but emptiness inside them. So when they meet Juan, they want to take his overwhelming energy, his lifestyle and they do not care if he is a cruel person or a murderer. They want a piece of him so that they themselves can feel something. Juan is a man, who takes advantage of others. And these poor women that hate themselves want to be with him because they have no idea, what love is."

***Flammen* (parts)**

Prologue

Scene 1: *Nocturne*

Scene 2: *Song of Fire*

Scene 3: *Midnight Mass*

Scene 4: *Chimera*

Scene 5: *Gallery*

Scene 6: *Dialogue*

Scene 7: *Tempest*

Scene 8: *Conversation with the Sea*

Scene 9: *Carnival Night*

Scene 10: *Banquet*

Scene 11: *Nocturne*

Press conference guests

Calixto Bieito, director

Jiří Rožeň, conductor

Denys Pivnitskyi, tenor

Tone Kummervold, mezzosoprano

Victoria Khoroshunova, soprano

Tereza Dubska, Musica non grata project manager

Andreas Krause, Artistic editor in chief / Contemporary Music, Concert Opera Media Division

Schott Music GmbH & Co. KG

Dates of performances

June: 12, 15, 18 and 24

November: 17 and 26

Janáček Brno: 20 Nov 2022

Production team

Conductor: Jiří Rožeň

Director: Calixto Bieito

Stage designer: Calixto Bieito, Anna-Sofia Kirsch

Costume designer: Barbora Maleninská

Lighting designer: Jan Dörner

Chorus master: Adolf Melichar

Dramaturge: Jitka Slavíková

Cast

Don Juan: Denys Pivnitskyi (Czech debut)

La Morte (Death): Tone Kummervold (Czech debut)

Donna Anna / Nun / Woman: Victoria Khoroshunova (Czech debut)

Marguerite: Tamara Morozová

Commendatore: Jan Hnyk

Arlecchino: Michal Marhold

Pulcinella: Vít Šantora

Pantalone: Jaroslav Patočka

Don Juan's Father: Josef Palán

Shadows: Magdalena Heboussová / Tamara Morozová / Yukiko Kinjo / Stanislava Jirků /

Veronika Hajnová / Kateřina Jalovcová

State Opera Chorus

State Opera Chorus

With the National Theatre Opera Ballet under Jiří Hejna

Production information

<https://bit.ly/3GPadtb>

Photographs (available to download until 30 June)

Photographs from the prepared premiere

https://1drv.ms/u/s!ApBE3x3pPyNihbA8lHpjvT_1G43-Gg?e=9rEOZc

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Pictures in press quality to be provided on request (contact Press Musica non grata)

Photographs of the artists

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