

The 8th Door

David Kettle

'It's a piece of music theatre. Or a piece of visual theatre with music. Or even a piece of music with visual theatre. What I love about *The 8th Door* is that it's really hard to say what it is – that's what's exciting.'

Director Matthew Lenton isn't struggling to define *The 8th Door* but, instead, positively relishing its genre-blurring innovation. And indeed, so enmeshed are the work's music, text and staging that it's almost impossible to pick them apart, or to say which came first.

'It was a really exciting prospect to engage with Bartók's opera, *Bluebeard's Castle*,' agrees *The 8th Door*'s composer Lliam Paterson. 'But most exciting was to create this new form – a brand-new medium.'

The 8th Door is very much the creation of these two men: Lenton, Artistic Director of Glasgow's Vanishing Point theatre company, and Paterson, Scottish Opera's Composer in Residence. And it was born out of the thorny question of deciding on a suitable companion piece for Bartók's powerful one-act opera. One thing both were clear on, however, was that the companion piece wouldn't be an opera itself. 'It's in the nature of this co-production between Scottish Opera and Vanishing Point,' continues Lenton, 'that it had to be a piece that combines the forces and artistic temperaments of both organisations.'

In contemplating the piece of music that he would write, one of Paterson's first preoccupations was – not surprisingly – the voice itself. 'Initially there weren't going to be any voices in the piece at all,' he admits, 'but then there was the question of the actors on stage, and whether they'd speak any text. We still wanted the power of the operatic voice, so in the end we moved the singers into the pit with the orchestra – there are six, all amplified.'

Their text is a mix of Hungarian 20th-century poetry, both in its original language and in English translations by Scottish poet Edwin Morgan. 'At the time I was writing *The 8th Door*,' continues Paterson, 'I'd been composing an Edwin Morgan song cycle called *Spirit of the Place*. I discovered that he'd translated Hungarian poetry into English and, in fact, specific Hungarian poets that Bartók and his librettist Béla Balázs knew. Matt and I found that those poems share a lot of the same themes as *Bluebeard* – alienation, isolation, love and its breaking apart – so they very naturally became part of the piece.'



And, Lenton continues, deploying the poetry in both its original and translated languages took on a special significance, too. 'Liam begins with the sung poetry in English, then it gradually begins to overlap with Hungarian, and then becomes more fully embodied in Hungarian. It's charting two people no longer able to communicate – and also drawing us ever closer to the world of *Bluebeard's Castle*.'

Difficult to define though it might be, *The 8th Door* does have a definite relationship with Bartók's opera – nothing as obvious as a straightforward prologue, but instead, perhaps, a mirror. 'It's definitely a reflection of *Bluebeard's Castle* in some ways,' explains Paterson. 'But I guess I almost view it as a journey into yourself, into your subconscious, in preparation for the opera.'

'It's an independent piece of work,' Lenton stresses, 'but one that has got *Bluebeard's* blood in its veins. In *The 8th Door*, you can see cracks, but we haven't yet fallen into them. In *Bluebeard's Castle*, our protagonists have fallen into those cracks, and they're in a very different place.'

That crux point between the two works – of leaving one world and entering another – occurs in the final section of *The 8th Door*, appropriately entitled 'Epilogue . . . Prologue', which Paterson has written as an intentional bridge into Bartók's opera. 'The very last bar ends with a low chord in the double basses,' he explains, 'and also has a pause on the final beat, so the piece actually ends with the conductor's

Above: Gresa Pallaska,
The 8th Door in
development.

hands up in the air. It's very much the same kind of sound world in which *Bluebeard* begins, and the conductor's final gesture prepares you for the first down-beat of the opera.'

There's no doubting that *The 8th Door* is a bold, ambitious undertaking – a brand-new work, interlacing music, text and stagecraft, reflecting and preparing us for *Bluebeard*, but also offering an entirely independent experience. But then, as Lenton asserts, being ambitious is what it's all about: 'I've always said that with a Vanishing Point show, if we know we can do it, there's no point in doing it. We only ever start things that we don't know if we can do – then you can really get to the beating heart of it all.'

WHAT TO LISTEN OUT FOR

Fluid form

The 8th Door is written in eight separate units – a Prologue, six Sections and the closing 'Epilogue ... Prologue'. Each has its own distinctive identity, although Paterson intentionally blurs the edges between them so that it's often hard to tell where one ends and the next begins.

Vocal effects

Paterson's setting of his text uses the full gamut of sounds a voice is capable of – from singing to speaking, through shouting, whispering, breathing and more – thereby matching the expressive intensity of *The 8th Door*'s themes.

Arias and ensembles

Despite his vocal inventiveness, Paterson also writes more traditional arias – for soprano, mezzo-soprano, tenor and baritone – as well as ensembles combining several voices, and even pitting one group of singers against another.

Melody and accompaniment

Rather than a traditional sense of the orchestral instruments accompanying the singers, in *The 8th Door* the two groups are far more closely interlinked, with instruments often following the same trajectory as the voices, even sometimes copying and elaborating on their melodies.

Canons

There's a lot of imitation between the voices, with one singer copying what another has sung, often just a beat or two apart – a canon, a technique Bartók himself also used. This sometimes happens very slowly, creating a rich texture whose intertwining lines are all very similar to each other, and it even occurs between spoken voices in Section 5.

Descents and ascents

Perhaps reflecting the work's dark themes, there are several gradual descents across all the voices and orchestra, as though the whole music is being pulled downwards by gravity – and likewise moments when the entire score lifts higher and higher, as though gravity has suddenly been removed (notably at the very end of the piece).

Orchestral knocking

Given the piece's title, and its relationship with an opera in which secrets are revealed behind a succession of doors, we perhaps shouldn't be surprised by Paterson's orchestral knocking gestures – thickly orchestrated but brief chords that punctuate the music throughout the piece, particularly at the opening.

*Below: Elicia Daly and Robert Jack, *The 8th Door* in development.*

David Kettle is a music critic for *The Scotsman*, *The Daily Telegraph* and *The Arts Desk*, and writes on music and the arts across a broad range of publications.

