

The Trial

David Kettle

'If you look at the world now, it's hard not to think that Kafka got it pretty spot on.' It's a dark observation. But Christopher Hampton, *The Trial's* librettist, is pointing to Franz Kafka's uncanny predictions of today's world in a novel written more than a century ago. A world of surveillance, bewildering bureaucracy and invisible threat – but also of an absurd kind of comedy as if, faced with such unknowable threats, all we can do is laugh.

'The horrors of bureaucracy, and the fact of turning them into a black comedy – I think, from that point of view, there's absolutely a message in *The Trial*,' continues the opera's composer Philip Glass. 'But it's not just gags about a world that has become unhinged, over-complicated, over-supervised, so that it's impossible for a sensible person even to find his way to the courthouse.'

Gags and threats, desperation and comedy – both sides are crucial to *The Trial's* unique atmosphere and achievement. It's one of the iconic works of 20th-century literature, pored over for decades by academics and previously transformed into a varied bunch of film and stage adaptations, by figures including Orson Welles and Harold Pinter. And it's a work that Glass and Hampton have themselves transformed into a punchy, hard-hitting and also very funny chamber opera.

Long-standing collaborators

Best known for the movie *Dangerous Liaisons*, for which he won the Oscar for Best Adapted Screenplay in 1988, Christopher Hampton has written plays, directed films and published numerous translations – he was the youngest writer to have a play performed in London's West End (*When Did You Last See My Mother?* in 1966, when he was still a student at Oxford), and has said he hopes to live to be the oldest, too. Philip Glass is one of the founding fathers of Minimalism – although he 'avowedly detests the term. And indeed, that catch-all shorthand for music using repetition and often simple harmonies has become less and less relevant to his increasingly eclectic, supple musical style in recent decades. Opera has formed a crucial part of Glass' output since his earliest pieces, notably in the revered 'portrait' trilogy *Einstein on the Beach*, *Satyagraha* and *Akhmaten* from the 1970s and 1980s.

The Trial is, in fact, the third opera that Glass and Hampton have created together. 'Our first collaboration was when Philip wrote the music for *The Secret Agent*, a film I directed in 1996,' explains Hampton. 'Back then, he



asked whether I'd be interested in writing an opera libretto. I said sure, and he said he'd get back to me. It was about eight years later that he sent me the J M Coetzee book *Waiting for the Barbarians*, and that was our first opera together.' Their second, the American Civil War drama *Appomattox*, followed in 2007.

For their third collaboration, *The Trial* seemed like a natural idea – if an ambitious one. Both men already knew the novel intimately, and it had made a strong impression on them in their teens. 'It was one of the very first books I read in German,' explains Hampton. 'I was a French and German student, but I think I even read it at school – Kafka writes in a very clear, lucid German. If you're going to read in the original German, you're better off starting with Kafka than with someone like Thomas Mann...'

Helplessness, guilt – and comedy

For both men, *The Trial's* continuing relevance to us today was another central reason to bring it to the opera stage. 'It's one of the great prophetic pieces of work of the 20th century,' Hampton says. 'It said that people were going to be punished for things that they had no control over and that, in some mysterious way, that was going to make them feel guilty about themselves.'

At its heart, he says, *The Trial* is about our helplessness, and about our guilt at our own helplessness. 'I suppose we always feel helpless in the face of the appalling injustices and horrors going on in the world – we all have a subliminal dread that it will all somehow fall on top of us.'

How did the pair actually decide on the concept of turning Kafka's far-sighted novel into an opera? 'The idea came from Philip,' says Hampton.

Above: Philip Glass (centre) with director Michael McCarthy and Christopher Hampton in rehearsal, Royal Opera House, July 2014.

'He's always loved the book and Kafka in general, and he had already written a chamber opera based on Kafka's story "In the Penal Colony".'

'I think the original idea is actually Kafka's!' adds Glass. 'Although it's very kind of Christopher to honour me with it. The reason I say it's really Kafka's idea is that he considered this work to be very much a black comedy. He'd read his own stories and think they were hilarious – like *Metamorphosis*, where a man wakes up in the morning as a cockroach. Of course, it's social critique and political satire in another way, too.'

'Both Philip and I insisted on the humour in the piece,' continues Hampton. 'I think the danger of adapting something like *The Trial* is that you somehow fall into solemnity, because it's such an iconic work – but I think Kafka did have a very sharp sense of humour.'

Both men are agreed on the opera's need for balance between its darkness and its comedy. But what makes *The Trial* a good story for operatic treatment in the first place? For Glass, it comes down to Kafka's strange, not-quite-realistic dramatis personae. 'You look at the characters and they're all completely interesting! The painter, for example, is a wonderful character, and he turns into a very comic character.' That artist, Titorelli, inspires one of Glass' most memorably effusive settings in the opera's second Act, with his obsequiously flattering portraits of judges.

'I could see that it was going to be quite complicated to reduce *The Trial* to an opera libretto,' continues Hampton. 'There have been many attempts at dramatising it in the past, and it's a bit of a "north face of the Eiger" project. But I actually enjoyed it very much. You enter into Kafka's universe for a while, and that enriches you, I think.'

Transatlantic teamwork

Glass and Hampton are both leading figures in their respective fields, but they also live on opposite sides of the Atlantic. How do they go about putting such a complex work as an opera together? The process, they agree, begins with the words. 'I read the novel a lot,' says Hampton, 'and then I made a kind of structure plan – that's very important with an opera, which gives you a very limited amount of time, because sung words take up a lot more time than spoken words. It's like condensing the whole thing down into a one-hour play. By the time I actually start to write, I'll have already worked out what's going to happen pretty much scene by scene.'

Hampton also explains that over the course of their three collaborations, he and Glass have got their transatlantic working relationship down to a fine art. 'Whenever I'm in New York or Philip is over here, we get together.'

But otherwise we like the phone – we tend to discuss things over the phone.'

For his part, Glass didn't start allocating notes to syllables until he received the full libretto from Hampton. 'Of course, Christopher has a great history as a playwright, so it's basically him who puts it on the stage. But occasionally I'd ask for revisions to the text.' And those revisions tend to be tiny details – but details that become crucial when transforming written text into song. 'If you have a consonant at the end of a word, for example, you might not hear how the word ends when it's sung – whether it's "the" or "that", "got" or "God". I also have a three-syllable rule – you don't want to have to sing a word like "beautifully", because by the time you've got to the end of the word, you've forgotten the beginning. But Christopher is very experienced at writing for singers.'

That sense of textual clarity, though, comes across sharply in the finished opera, and it's a tenet across his all stage works, Glass says: 'It's very important to be able to hear the words.' And for Hampton, the issue is connected both with the clarity of Kafka's original – clear, direct language describing situations and themes that are far from simple or straightforward – and with his desire to stay as near to it as he can. 'I worked from the original German, in fact,' Hampton explains. 'Kafka has really got an ear for dialogue, so most of the opera's dialogue is pretty close to the original, or at least to its spirit.'

Operatic neutron bombs

That sense of clarity comes also from the chamber forces that Glass employs in *The Trial*. It's a format he particularly enjoys: he's spoken of his chamber operas as being like neutron bombs – small, but packing a terrific punch. 'It's good training for a composer to write chamber operas,' he explains – although you might wonder how much more training the 80-year-old composer needs in his 26th stage work. 'And one clear advantage with smaller forces is that you don't have to use any amplification at all – once you bring in mics, all the balance goes out the window and you have no idea what's going to happen.'

As much as he enjoys creating chamber works, that choice of format is also down to the forces specified in the commission, Glass accepts – and those, he says, are partly negotiable. 'The sound world I create has a lot to do with how many instruments I'm allowed. We were originally discussing only about seven or eight players – it takes three to cover the woodwind, then four for the strings, so there's not a lot left! But that's where negotiations start...'

The styles of music that Glass creates, however, using his handful of musicians, are surprisingly wide-ranging, certainly for listeners more



familiar with the scintillating, propulsive repetitions of his early music. 'I gave myself permission to use different styles,' Glass laughs. 'This opera does have a particular sound, but most of my operas are actually quite different from each other. It doesn't have anything in common with *Satyagraha* or *Einstein on the Beach*, for example – and nor should it.' What was the specific sound that Glass conceived for the opera – something Eastern or Central European, for example, to match Kafka's own background? Not really, Glass says – he feels his musical settings are there more to evoke the atmosphere required for the story's contrasting scenes. 'At the beginning, for example, I use a kind of moving, rambling-around bassline that goes in and out of key, so to speak, to give a feeling of – well, let's put it this way: the opening of the opera is far from reassuring.'

Glass accepts that his and Hampton's vision of *The Trial* has raised some eyebrows. 'I think some people have been a little surprised by the music in the opera, but they shouldn't be. If you knew Kafka's work, you'd know where it was going.' And where have the two men been going? Towards a work that, despite its small scale, has enormous focus and a powerful impact – and a work that stays provocatively faithful to Kafka's sometimes maddening mix of comedy and darkness.

WHAT TO LISTEN OUT FOR

A diversity of styles

If you think you know what Philip Glass' music sounds like, *The Trial* might make you think again. The distinctive repetitions, arpeggios and chiming chords of his more familiar style are present and correct – notably at the end of Act I Scene 2b, when Josef K is about to seduce Fräulein Bürstner, and also in another seduction scene, with the court Washerwoman in Act I Scene 4. But there's plenty of dissonance, whole

Above: Philip Glass and Christopher Hampton in rehearsal, Royal Opera House, July 2014.

sections that refuse to settle into a simple key, and even seemingly nods to klezmer and Kurt Weill-like jazziness in Glass' wind and brass writing – the trombone, clarinet and percussion Prelude to Act II is a striking example.

Unsettling basslines

The Trial begins with a bare bassline that has more than a hint of menace to it. And that rumbling bassline is an idea that comes back again and again throughout the opera, never quite the same but always recognisable, as if it's something we can never really get away from – in the same way that his arrest and trial slowly take over Josef K's life. It's there in Act II Scene 1 when K, his uncle and the lawyer Huld are discussing K's case, and it even returns with paradoxically threatening jolliness in the opera's final scene.

Pivotal percussion

The Trial begins with an almost 'roll up, roll up', circus-style side drum roll (perhaps setting the tone for the far-fetched tale about to unfold), and percussion is a distinctive presence in Glass' score. The marimba fulfils what might, in earlier operas, have been the role of a piano or harpsichord in accompanying certain scenes, notably the flogging of Franz and Willem at the end of Act I, and the same scene ends with the thumping of a bass drum and the clanging of an anvil (two instruments that also return to underline the violence of the opera's close). Act II, again, opens with the nervy stuttering of woodblock, side drum and bass drum, and the incessant thud of the bass drum underlines the lawyer Huld's sinister abuse of his client Block in Act II Scene 3.

Vocal clarity

Glass' vocal settings are syllabic and follow the natural rhythms of speech, making them very clear to hear and understand – but that's not to suggest they lack character. Josef K retains a similar degree of dignity and flow in his vocal lines throughout, while Fräulein Bürstner has quick, breathless rhythms as she explains her nocturnal activities in Act I Scene 2b, and the unfortunate Block tends towards gabbling in Act II Scene 3.

Shifting harmonies

Just when you think Glass' music is following conventional progressions, it often takes a sidestep into something quite unfamiliar – for example, the almost fairground-like, whirling extravagance in Act II Scene 2, the comic scene with Titorelli the painter, as disorientating as it is funny; or, at the other extreme, the unpredictable, constantly shifting harmonies and sparse textures that accompany the Priest's philosophical tale that proves the opera's intellectual climax in Act II Scene 4.

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.