

REVERBERATIONS

BRINGING GUITAR TO THE OPERA STAGE

Michael Kudirka was tapped to be part of the score
for Thomas Adès' bold and strange new opera based on
Luis Buñuel's 'The Exterminating Angel'

by Blair Jackson



REVERBERATIONS

You never know what kind of stories will be turned into operas. Aside from the fantastical plots of many classic operas (Bible stories, Greek and Norse mythology, fairy tales!), the modern era has given us such unlikely story sources as the life of Gandhi (*Satyagraha*), the murder of a gay city supervisor in San Francisco (*Harvey Milk*), A-bomb pioneer Robert Oppenheimer (*Dr. Atomic*), and Russia's infamous "Mad Monk" (*Rasputin*), to name just a few. Still, few would have predicted that one of the opera sensations of 2016 would be

The opera of *The Exterminating Angel*, which premiered to rave reviews in the summer of 2016 at the Salzburg Music Festival in Austria, is a three-act work, with music by acclaimed British composer, conductor, and pianist Thomas Adès, and text by Tom Cairns in collaboration with Adès, based on the original film script by Buñuel and Luis Alcoriza. Adès has written two previous operas, as well as numerous orchestral works, chamber pieces, choral compositions, and more. Though often working in decidedly modern idioms, Adès also draws

Kudirka help shape the part, he played it for the Salzburg performances of the opera, and will reprise that role this spring when *The Exterminating Angel* has its London debut at Covent Garden (April 24–May 8), and then moves to the U.S. for a number of performances at the Metropolitan Opera in New York (October 26–November 24).

On the phone from Wisconsin, where he currently lives with his wife, flautist Tara Schwab (an assistant professor at the University of Wisconsin, Stevens Point; they play together as Duo Amantis), Kudirka



Thomas Adès

BRAN VOCE PHOTO

'I'LL BE HONEST WITH YOU—THOSE FIVE MINUTES OF GUITAR MUSIC ARE RIDICULOUSLY DIFFICULT, BUT THAT'S THE WAY ADÈS WRITES FOR EVERYBODY! I MADE A GREAT EFFORT NOT TO TELL HIM ALL THE THINGS THAT WERE INCONVENIENT; JUST THE THINGS THAT WERE IMPOSSIBLE.'

—MICHAEL KUDIRKA

an adaptation of Spanish surrealist director Luis Buñuel's darkly satirical 1962 film *The Exterminating Angel* (*El ángel exterminador*). It's about a lavish dinner party in a mansion that turns unsettlingly, then horrifically, strange when the well-heeled guests find they are psychologically unable to leave the house. Over the course of a few days, many bleak shadings of the human soul are revealed, including guilt, greed, paranoia, murderous inclinations, and more. Not exactly *opera bouffe* material (though it does have sharply humorous moments).

inspiration from past masters; he is a true eclectic. This approach is evident in his score for *The Exterminating Angel*, which traverses a wide range of old and modern styles—and even includes a five-minute sequence dominated by classical guitar!

To consult on and polish that guitar part, which plays under a bizarre third-act scene in which a (projected) disembodied hand creeps across the stage to strangle one of the party guests, Adès enlisted the help of Michael Kudirka, who for many years has been a leading proponent of new directions in classical-guitar music. Not only did

filled us in on his involvement with the project, which dates back several years, when he was still based in Los Angeles. "Adès usually spends about half the year in London and the other half in Los Angeles, and we were introduced in L.A. by our mutual friend, composer Veronika Krausas. After hearing me perform Hans Werner Henze's *Royal Winter Music* as a part of Krausas' chamber opera *Mad Lady Macbeth*, he would occasionally show up at my performances: He heard a couple of solo programs, and he also saw me play some early music on theorbo and viola da gamba.

“After he’d heard me in all these different situations, we ran into each other at a dinner party and I popped the question to him: ‘Have you ever considered writing any guitar music?’ That’s a question I feel compelled to ask any time I meet a composer of that stature,” Kudirka adds with a laugh. “He answered that he’d love to, but he’s a pianist and he said he was a bit intimidated by how idiosyncratic the guitar is, but that he’d think about it.

“A couple of years passed, we stayed in touch, and he saw me a couple of more

kinds of *rasgueado* strumming to help give a wider palette to some of the accented notes. I wanted to change as little of what he wrote as possible, but there were a few harmonies where there were dense tone clusters you can do really easily on the piano—these really tight intervals—I’d say, ‘I can get that one or that one [on guitar], but I can’t get all of them.’ So it was a matter of little bits of omission. I’ll be honest with you—these five minutes of guitar music are ridiculously difficult, but that’s the way he writes for everybody! I made a great

begins with nearly a minute of solo guitar, then accompanies a mezzo soprano (played at the premiere by the incomparable Anne Sofie von Otter) for an aria. “At the end of the aria,” Kudirka says, “the Ondes Martinot—that great early electronic instrument [invented in the late 1920s]—comes in with this deep, spooky bassline from the keyboard, and these really creepy Theremin-like gliding lines. That instrument sort of represents the malevolent nature of the room that they’re stuck in. At the very end, the guitar does a huge slow glissando



Michael Kudirka



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times in L.A., even after I’d moved to Wisconsin. Then, last February, I was doing a series of performance residencies [in southern California] at Chapman University, USC, and CalArts, and he said, ‘Hey, as long as you’re in town, how about if you come by my house in L.A. I’ve got this little guitar aria in the middle of my new opera. Help me work on it.’ So I went over there and we went through it one note and one chord at a time. His notation was very pianistic, especially in his approach to articulation, so we found certain timbres and techniques such as *tambora* and different

effort *not* to tell him all the things that were inconvenient; just the things that were impossible.

“So after we got through everything he said, ‘This is great—I’d love to have you play it as well. Let me talk to people at the Salzburg Festspiele,’ where it was going to be premiered. About a month later, I got an email from them saying they’d like me to come over and do it. We did a few days of rehearsal in Vienna and then moved over to Salzburg.”

The musical passage in question scores what could be a dream or hallucination; it

with a *rasgueado* tremolo going on all the way from the first fret up to the bridge, as the hand is actually crawling up the character’s body to strangle her. Tubular bells chime three times, and at the moment my left-hand fingers are just half an inch from the bridge, with my right-hand fingers doing a tremolo on the shortest imaginable string—at the peak of this glissando—Adès cues the entire orchestra to come in with an absolutely devastating cacophony. It’s fantastic!

“One of the reasons Thomas Adès is such a successful composer,” Kudirka

continues, “is that he has the ability to write music that seems oddly familiar, partly because he is able to draw inspiration from the whole history of Western music and reimagine it in new contexts. In this opera, there are elements that are Wagnerian, and others that sound like you’re listening to Francois Couperin’s harpsichord music, and other moments like this grizzly parody of Johann Sebastian Bach’s *Sheep May Safely Graze* done in this sort of sin-

ister reimagining—as sheep are being led to the slaughter! And of course he’s more than willing to push into unfamiliar territory. The musical styles in the opera are so diverse, there will be moments that some will find incredibly harsh; it can be a real assault on the senses. But there are also moments that are absolutely sublime—just the most beautiful, luscious sounds that make you think, ‘I want to die listening to this music!’”

Of course, working on *The Exterminating Angel* has just been a small slice of what the always-busy Kudirka has been up to lately. The guitarist and educator, who received both his bachelor’s and doctoral degrees from USC’s Thornton School of Music, and his master’s from the California Institute of the Arts, has always had one foot in classical guitar tradition and the other in cutting-edge modernity. For instance, the well-regarded (but now defunct) ensemble he founded, the Helios Guitar Quartet, played Kudirka’s four-guitar arrangement of the first book of Bach’s *Well-Tempered Clavier*, but also contemporary works by Ian Krouse, Brian Head, and others. As a solo performer and in his guitar duo with Eric Benzant-Feldra he has championed disparate modern composers such as Jeffrey Holmes, Dusan Bogdanovic, Miroslav Tadic (with whom he studied at CalArts), Chinary Ung, and many more.

But much of his recent focus has been on Duo Amantis with Tara Schwab, which has a repertoire spanning Giuliani to Ravel to Piazzolla to some of the aforementioned modernists. The pair’s forthcoming CD on Doberman-Yppan’s label, which Kudirka hopes will be out by summer, will focus primarily on 21st century pieces by Bogdanovic, Tadic, Holmes, Ourkouzounov, and others, eschewing some of the more “popular” pieces they often play live.

“Our feeling about recording,” Kudirka offers, “is that pieces like Piazzolla’s [*History of the Tango*] or Takamitsu’s *Toward the Sea* have been recorded so many times already, yet there are many exceptional compositions that have never been recorded at all, or only once. It’s a little tricky sometimes to carve out the area we want to live in with new music, because there is such a wide range of aesthetic sensibility with quite a bit of tribalism between camps. Ironically, I wouldn’t even consider myself or my flute-and-guitar duo to be a part of the die-hard new music scene. There are festivals out there that would not accept what we do because it’s far too accessible—and others that think we’re entirely too avant-garde! In the end, though, this doesn’t bother me because my guiding principle has always been that I will always commit myself to sharing the work of truly great composers of any time, including our own, and it doesn’t matter if it’s Francesco da Milano or Jeffrey Holmes... or Thomas Adès.” **CG**

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