



Title

Orlando at the Vienna State Opera

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Orlando at the Vienna State Opera

by Charles Asprey • 29.01.2020

The Wiener Staatsoper is nothing if not illustrious. Or at least it is considered so these days. As it was nearing completion in 1869 the public decided that the building's design was humiliatingly inadequate, giving it the derogatory nickname 'the Königgrätz of architecture', after the recent (and unexpected) defeat of the Austrian army by the Prussians, who then went on and bested the French a couple of years later. The two principal architects predictably bore the brunt of the criticism, although neither saw the building completed. In 1868 August Sicard von Sicardsburg succumbed to tuberculosis and Eduard Van der Nüll killed himself. Despite this inauspicious start, on 25th May 1869 the opera opened with Mozart's *Don Giovanni*, with such auspicious guests as Emperor Franz Josef in attendance.

It has taken the Vienna State Opera every one of the intervening 150 years to invite its first female composer to its stage. In December 2019 the opera house staged *Orlando* (based on the novel by Virginia Woolf from 1928), with music and libretto by Olga Neuwirth and costumes designed by Rei Kawakubo, the celebrated creative force behind Comme des Garçons. This combination promised much and in a way it delivered: it was both extraordinary and an extraordinary ordeal to sit through.



Fig. 1 Performance photograph from *Orlando* at the Vienna State Opera, 8th December 2019. (Courtesy Wiener Staatsoper; photograph Michael Pöhn).

Neuwirth subtitles the performance 'A fictional musical biography in 19 scenes', a clue to the slog that awaited even the most devoted opera fan. Woolf's radical book needs little introduction, being a key example of early twentieth-century gender fluidity and therefore especially *au courant*. Briefly, therefore: our hero is a young English aristocrat living in the golden age of Elizabeth I, where he flourishes under her patronage. After a series of failed attempts at courting women he retreats to his estate where he falls into a trance-like stupor. When he awakes he resolves to be a poet. This goes about as well as his courting of young ladies and he flees England to become an ambassador to a distant land, a cruel and war-like place. Another period of semi-coma ensues and when he again awakes he discovers, happily but with some trepidation, that he is a woman. She lives for another three hundred years or so, the story ending on the final stroke of midnight on Thursday October 11th 1928, the day the novel was published. Who was it who described opera as the world's most unlikely stories, set to music?



Fig. 2 Performance photograph from *Orlando* at the Vienna State Opera, 8th December 2019. (Courtesy Wiener Staatsoper; photograph Michael Pöhn).

Kawakubo's designs are admired for their ability to deconstruct and reconstruct the shape of the body, creating abstraction with cloth. For over fifty years she has fed radical forms and materials into the fashion world via her haute-couture and playful ready-to-wear collections. The motive behind her pairing with Neuwirth is clear. The music, like the clothes, provides an abrasive abstract experience, one that is almost aggressively untraditional. Neuwirth writes in the programme that she wanted to create 'a completely new listening experience', and in this she was entirely successful: Narrators talking over the singing Orlando made it difficult to hear either and required one to consult the subtitles provided by an iPad on the back of every seat; lighting spot-lit a peripheral character leaving the singer in the gloom; and trios of heralds stood in boxes either side of the stage, dressed like members of Hot Chip and playing random percussive instruments including knocking coconut halves together à la Monty Python. There came yet more noise from the orchestra pit courtesy of vibraphones, Thai gongs, steel tubes and anvils, egg shakers, thunder sheets, synthesisers, small ratchets, mechanical horns with mounted rubber balls (no, me neither), sleigh bells and guiros.

Another of Neuwirth's comments in the programme is harder to reconcile. She claims that 'music is non-material art. Since it offers nothing tangible it quickly becomes about emotions'. Well, yes and no. In the over three-hour-long performance, such non-materiality and intangibility provided the equivalent of a slap in the face every few minutes, giving the sense that the entire production was conceived to be controversial. The music was raw and sonically harsh, like sandpaper on the skin, casting a challenge to the expectations of the genre which many did not sit through. The final hour in particular was excruciating. Whereas Woolf's book ends

punctually in 1928, Neuwirth ordains that Orlando should live (and bore) for yet another ninety-one years. This is where the nineteen scenes become a problem, because the focus of Orlando's life descends into a blur as she and we travel beyond the inter-war years into screaming Stukas bombing Poland in 1939 (cue awkward shifting of Viennese bums in seats), the Holocaust (ditto), the fall of Berlin, nuclear devastation in Japan, the rise of Pop culture in the United States, the Swinging Sixties, Vietnam, Civil Rights and the beginning of mass-protest movements, the early computer age and the fall of the Berlin Wall followed by the real computer age and finally, panting exhaustedly (I'm sure to have left something out), we arrive into the sort-of-present, the era of the internet, gender-fluidity, more protests, right-wing politics, mis/dis-information, twenty-four-hour sprawling newsfeeds, mobile devices, climate change (sung by a Fridays for Future chorus of forty or so children all wearing colourful Comme des Garçons nightshirts) and the fear of a dystopic future. Given that this sprawling and messy timeline is crammed into less than an hour you would have been perfectly justified in wondering, at any given moment, quite what the fuck was going on.



Fig. 3 Performance photograph from *Orlando* at the Vienna State Opera, 8th December 2019. (Courtesy Wiener Staatsoper; photograph Michael Pöhn).

Although this update to Woolf's story is in some ways current, even edgy, it is entirely predictable because the message is relentlessly earnest (unlike the original *Orlando*). You sense our modern heroine is simply jumping on bandwagons, being over-zealous, attending every march with a clever banner and being oh so voluble, via her Twitter feed, at every opportunity. Perhaps this is a fair reflection of our social-media enabled times, but watching it sung and spoken in English, where it can take minutes to say a single sentence, is wearying. The mistake here seems to be the assumption that the present is still relevant, when in fact the present is already the past. It would have been more interesting to send Orlando into the near future, rather than hang out with her in a tiresome Now and suffer her embarrassingly short attention span.

All this begs the question: who is this production for? It seems to want to be for everyone, but not everyone goes to the opera. With tickets costing over two hundred euros, is it for a conservative group of regular opera attendees who need to be encouraged to open up to gender fluidity, social injustice and the dangers of climate change? That seems unlikely, which is not to rule it out. More likely is that this was an ambitious attempt to update a familiar story via a classical genre in a respected arena, in order to make up for lost time; regrettably it felt like an unnecessarily complicated and clumsy challenge to both. While the production as a whole is admirable for its ambition (and those costumes deserve an exhibition all of their own), the overriding feeling is of a carnival parade that took a wrong turn down a side-street and never made it to the party in the town square. Let's hope the stripey *Comme des Garçons* nightshirts make it to the shops in time for next Christmas.



Fig. 4 Performance photograph from *Orlando* at the Vienna State Opera, 8th December 2019. (Courtesy Wiener Staatsoper; photograph Michael Pöhn).



Fig. 5 Performance photograph from *Orlando* at the Vienna State Opera, 8th December 2019. (Courtesy Wiener Staatsoper; photograph Michael Pöhn).



Fig. 6 Performance photograph from *Orlando* at the Vienna State Opera, 8th December 2019. (Courtesy Wiener Staatsoper; photograph Michael Pöhn).



Fig. 7 Performance photograph from *Orlando* at the Vienna State Opera, 8th December 2019. (Courtesy Wiener Staatsoper; photograph Michael Pöhn).

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