TANSY DAVIES

What Did We See?

Operas, like Tansy Davies’s, on contemporary subjects and tragedies are among the boldest and most controversial works in any composer’s catalogue. Whether it’s Davies’s Between Worlds; Judith Weir’s Armida, made for Channel 4 in 2005 and set amid the embers of a conflict in the Middle East, a story of love and magic and religious conflict that alluded to the Iraq War; John Adams’s The Death of Klinghoffer, staging the hijacking of the Achille Lauro in the Mediterranean in 1985; or Mark-Anthony Turnage’s opera on the life and death of Anna Nicole Smith, these composers have all dared to put contemporary stories on opera stages. Just as well: in addition to everything else the art form does, if opera can’t speak directly and profoundly about the essential issues of our time, what is it really for?

BEETHOVEN

Piano Concerto No. 5, ‘Emperor’

… and other misnomers. I sometimes wish pieces like the ‘Emperor’, the ‘Jupiter’ or the ‘London’ had never had these sometimes ludicrous titles appended to them by publishers or by the mysterious workings of music-historical reception. Who really wants an imperial piano concerto or a Jovian symphony, as Mozart’s has become, or a symphony that sums up a city – well, not quite, but Haydn’s 104th and last is idiotically called the ‘London’ for no other reason than that it’s part of the series of 12 symphonies, Nos. 93–104, that he composed for Salomon’s concerts in the capital. Imagine if Op. 73 of Beethoven were simply ‘Piano Concerto No. 5 in E flat major’, wouldn’t we be freer in our imaginations to find other ways to hear this music? Maybe we’d focus on the radiant dream of suspended time in the slow movement or the riotous dance of the last movement. The same goes for Mozart’s ‘Jupiter’: if we attended to the tragically intense intimacy of its slow movement or its crazy juxtapositions of styles and manners in the first, we might find a different moniker for the piece. It’s a postmodern symphony avant la lettre, so let’s call it ‘The Postmodern’, and Beethoven’s Op. 73 ‘The Radically Time-Stopping’. Those will definitely catch on, I can feel it …

BRAHMS

Symphony No. 2

That difficult second album. Actually Brahms didn’t find the process of composing his Second Symphony anything like as torturous as his First but some composers have found it difficult to replicate the success of their earliest forays into a form – whether that’s a justified assessment or a simple fluke of the way that music has been received by critics and audiences. Elgar’s Second Symphony didn’t have the same impact as his First in his lifetime; at the premiere, the composer asked the leader of the orchestra about the muted reaction of the audience: ‘What’s the matter with them? They sit there like a lot of stuffed pigs.’ Walton’s Second Symphony has never been as popular as his First, despite its structural and even serial innovations, while Tchaikovsky’s Second Piano Concerto is a piece you’re lucky to hear in concert, living for ever in the shadow of the First, and all because it doesn’t start with That Tune.