

# It could have been worse

## Walter Benjamin as opera

Brian Ferneyhough/Charles Bernstein, *Shadowtime*, Prinzregententheater, Munich, 25 May 2004.

Something about Walter Benjamin – the life, his theory – makes him an obvious candidate for representation or fictionalization. He has been the subject of one novel and has played a walk-on part in a couple more. There are art films that take his Pyrenees flight as thematic, and he is intimated as a presence in the Staatsbibliothek Berlin in Wim Wenders' *Wings of Desire*. Paintings and collages using his face crop up now and again, echoes of the book covers that inevitably sport his phizog. There is even a building – Libeskind's Jewish museum in Berlin – constructed according to themes derived from his writings. Now Benjamin has had an opera written about him, premièred in Munich's Prinzregententheater at the Munich Biennale on 25 May 2004. The composer is Brian Ferneyhough, a professor at Stanford and well known as a composer of complex and uncompromising late modernist music, who emerged at a time when the banal simplicities of minimalism were conquering concert halls with a promise of a populist revival in 'classical' music. The librettist is Charles Bernstein, professor of English Literature at University of Pennsylvania and a main force of 'language poetry', an experimental US strain of poetics.

Ferneyhough and Bernstein insist that *Shadowtime* is not about Benjamin's life but about ideas, Benjamin's ideas and the ideas of others, sundry others. Indeed the opera opens with some Heideggeriana penned by Ferneyhough: 'Understanding of Being reveals itself as the innermost ground of our finitude. Ontology is an index of finitude. Once grasped, the finitude of existence brings *Dasein* into the simplicity of its fate.' The opera's libretto swirls with gestures towards Western philosophy, metaphysics and theology, especially in relation to time. But as much as it wants to argue that it is about ideas, the opera still needs to hang itself off the hook of a life, or more accurately a death.

It begins biographically, in the hour of Benjamin's death in the Hotel Fonda de Francia in Port Bou, on the border between France and Spain. Walter Benjamin and his travelling companion Henny Gurland are told that their further journey to Lisbon (and thence to the USA) is impossible because they lack the requisite visa. They must return to France. A doctor advises Benjamin to rest as his health is impaired. That night Benjamin takes his own life. Many writers have made Benjamin's suicide emblematic of other things: the greater tragedy of the fate of the Jews, the dashing of political utopias, the end of European culture. Preparing to flee Europe, his life in danger as a Jew and as a Marxist, he spoke about himself as 'the last intellectual'; he feared a culturally impoverished existence in the USA or Palestine. And so he represents for some the model of arcane intellectualism, an inept character at home only among his books, embedded in a European culture that is literally being bombed and dismantled around him. In the first scene of the opera, as Benjamin slips towards death, scenes from his life flit by. Here the libretto attempts to condense the essence of his philosophy in staccato lines. In a scene set in Berlin in 1917 with his future wife, he has the words:

Only for the sake of the hopeless  
have we been given hope....

It is not just women  
who prostitute themselves....

We all are  
for we are all  
objects and subjects  
of culture.

Each line can be traced back to a comment of Benjamin's, and yet here in the context of the libretto all meaning evaporates from them and they seem to mark positions without any meaningful articulation. These are the types of things said by Benjamin. These words mark the spot of his thought, but fail to make it articulate, for they are empty slogans that take no account of their existence in a post-modernist libretto, in an opera by a notoriously 'complex' composer, in a theatre happening now. The words remain just words. Later Benjamin chats with Gershom Scholem:

If we can't convict God  
Then let's indict the bourgeoisie  
For they promise a utopia  
That never comes, exploiting  
Each according to their ability  
To be exploited, making commodities  
Of all that could have been  
Sparks of hope.

Here we see addressed the 'rift' in Benjamin's thought between 'metaphysics and materialism', named by the libretto's Scholem as 'the peas' in the 'shell game' of the 'Adventurer King of Ambiguity and Obscurity'. It is, inevitably, this very lack of commitment to one or the other side, this straddling in the middle, between religion and Marxism, between comfort and the cause, that is said to bring about Benjamin's death. This line has been often peddled in the 'critical' literature. There must be something consoling in it.

*WB*: I know my vacillations  
Janus faced  
Make strange connections  
I go full throttle in one direction  
Then arc my thought  
Against itself, a bow forever  
Waiting for an arrow.

*Scholem*: Self-deception can lead only to suicide.

*WB*: Better  
a bad revolutionary  
Than a good bourgeois.

The third section of the opera is titled 'Doctrine of Similarity'. Thirteen short pieces for a 48-piece choir with various instruments are designed to 'reflect the nature of history, time and the process of translation and transformation' (Bernstein). Set in play are various formal games on both lyrical and musical levels. Musically, Ferneyhough notes that each of the thirteen pieces is concerned with *Nachbildung*, imitation in some form, whether using repetition, recombination or the mimicry of canonic musical structures. The texts of the libretto are derived also from experiments with *Nachbildung*. There are anagrams of the name Walter Benjamin. 'I'm a lent barn Jew/A mint bran jewel/A barn Jew melt in', and so on. There are variations on the last line of a Mallarmé poem. There are homophonic transpositions (or translations), such that the line 'There's no solution to the question if the question becomes the solution' is repeated

homophonically as 'Tears sole dilution chews the winsome imp's affection's freedom's sheer incursion'. The texts are structured according to relationships between prime numbers. All these parameters draw the text away from engagement with Benjamin's mode and means of thinking, and *Nachbildung* opens the way to repetition, rather than the more characteristically Benjaminian motif of reproduction. The composer and librettist cite Benjaminian notions such as mimesis and reproduction, but, in effect, they evoke different notions, listed by Ferneyhough elsewhere as repetition, variation, refraction and similation. Are these not rather the terms of an idea-voided minimalism?

Repetition becomes pastiche as, in the next scene, a romantically accented piano dominates. Benjamin has entered the underworld, which is also a Las Vegas piano bar. Las Vegas, the programme notes state, 'is the paradise of the culture industry with an open channel to its hell'. With this observation Ferneyhough's immersion in Adornian musical aesthetics comes to the fore. Ferneyhough led the summer programme at Adorno's old stomping ground Darmstadt between 1984 and 1994. The pianist tinkles and twitters at his piano in staccato lines of monosyllables and contextless prepositions. In this place Benjamin will be assailed by a phantasmagoria of figures, subjecting him to eleven interrogations, just as in the myth of the Sphinx who demanded the same of those who were to enter the realm of the dead. As eight hundred years of musical history in the West from 1000 to 1825 is recapitulated rapidly, Benjamin meets a three-headed Cerberus, two of whose heads are Karl and Groucho Marx. He encounters Hitler, Pope Pius XII, Joan of Arc, the Golem, Baal Shem Tov dressed as a vampire, and Einstein. Two-dimensional cut-out figures are wheeled on to ask questions about past and future, memory and forgetting. They are as inert as are the words that they utter via the choir. They sing lines that seemingly bear no meaningful relation to the singer. For example, Hitler sings:

Can you go nowhere?  
 Be no place?  
 Come into nothing?  
 Can you hold air?  
 Can you be transfixed by transitions alone?

Bernstein and Ferneyhough want to resist realism and representation, but is there not some responsibility to historical detail to be observed? In this evocative swirl it would seem that anyone can say anything. Unsurprisingly Benjamin disappears from the opera at this point. The libretto in the penultimate scene plays more word games using permutation and homophony from Heine's German into an English unrelated in terms of meaning. The final scene fizzles out into melancholy.

For now time is lost  
 now time is gained  
 now time is empty  
 now time is full  
 now time is lived  
 now time is hollow  
 now time is made  
 now time is stone.





At one point in the libretto the words estrangement and engagement are mentioned, as part of a list of questions: Is aversion better than engagement? Is engagement better than detachment? Is assimilation better than estrangement? Is estrangement better than allegory? These terms derive from Brecht, and they make sense in a Brechtian dramaturgical and political universe. Here, though, they are just odd words from arguments once had, filigree from the surface texture of European politicized culture. Although absent in the opera, Brecht was a crucial influence on Benjamin, in particular in relation to questions of staging and poetry. Significantly, Ferneyhough refuses the term 'opera' and prefers to call *Shadowtime* 'music theatre'. Music theatre has, like opera, a European pedigree, born in the 1960s in Germany and Italy and associated with experimentalism, for example the work of Hans Werner Henze, Györgi Ligeti, Sylvano Bussotti. Music theatre was an attempt to reinvent an exhausted operatic tradition. Music theatre also harks back to Brecht/Weill and Brecht/Eisler collaborations in the 1920s and 1930s and indicates the possibility of introducing politics, or reintroducing politics, into the operatic form. It is therefore all the more perplexing that Brecht leaves his traces only in a couple of words in the libretto and that his musical collaborators, Weill, Eisler and Dessau, offer no musical suggestions. If the name music theatre signals an ambition to experiment formally and to have some sort of political impact, both these aspects have been, in the event, severely compromised. There is no irony, no political spleen, and most of all there is no fun or enjoyment – only the alienating absurdity of trying to carry mock-philosophical arguments in atonal singing. However, on the night of the performance few of the words could be discerned. And the swirl of inaudible words, together with the scamperings of a choir of ginger-haired angels and the cardboard cut-outs, distracted from the music. The musicians were sunk into an orchestra pit, making all of their gymnastic exertions on their instruments invisible and, thereby, denying the audience one of the main pleasures of a Ferneyhough performance.

It could have been worse. It could have been sentimental. It could have anchored itself to the romance and tragedy of the death. But here the error of sentiment was replaced by an ideologically driven commitment to experimentation. The dense musical score, the layered and playful libretto, add up to no more than a muddle of parts that do no more than allude to Benjamin. Benjamin becomes an impulse, a motive, but is not found again in the opera. Is it possible to turn his, or anyone's, philosophical ideas into musical form? In Benjamin's case, at the very least, one would need to think more consequentially about the critical and theoretical issues that he dealt with, instead of the predictable motifs of angels, melancholics, suicide, which all become an external matter of representation. Integrated not simply in a thematic sense but also in a practical sense could be the Benjaminian themes of reproduction, aura, commodification of culture, the relationship of aesthetics and politics, the political implications of the construction and handing on of tradition, and the Brechtian theses on technology, authorship, reception and the demands of the moment.

*Shadowtime* has four further runs over the next eighteen months: in Paris, the Ruhr, London and New York.

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