

Wolfgang Rihm - Die Eroberung von Mexico [The Conquest of Mexico] (2015)

Written by bluesever

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1. Act 1 & 2 2. Act 3 & 4 Angela Denoke - Montezuma Bo Skovhus - Cortez Susanna Andersson - Soprano MarieAnge Todorovitch - Mezzosopran Stephan Rehm - Sprecher 1 Peter Pruchniewitz - Sprecher 2 ORF RadioSymphonieorchester Wien Ingo Metzmacher – conductor Felsenreitschule, Salzburg Festival (07/2015)

This year the Salzburg Festival hoped to offer a new opera by György Kurtág, but it was not forthcoming from the composer, who turns 90 in February. Accordingly, to fill the new-opera slot the festival turned to *The Conquest of Mexico* (1992) by Wolfgang Rihm, one of Germany's most successful and prolific composers.

In subject matter, Rihm nominally followed examples set by Gaspare Spontini and Roger Sessions and based his “music theatre” piece on the clash between Aztec ruler Montezuma and Spanish conquistador Hernán Cortés. But by casting a soprano as Montezuma and a baritone as Cortés and by fashioning a non-narrative libretto (from texts by Antonin Artaud and Octavio Paz) that is not time or space specific, Rihm produced a generic battle of the sexes. Salzburg's inventive production by Peter Konwitschny, with sets and costumes by Johannes Leiacker, eagerly accepted the libretto's apparent invitation to fill in what's missing by setting the action in a modern living room (a rug and a painting by Frida Kahlo suggest Mexico) in which Montezuma, dressed like a housewife, nervously awaits “her” date Cortés, who arrives bearing flowers.

The situation deteriorates. Cortés forces himself on Montezuma; “she” accuses him of wanting only gold and brings on women wearing only dabs of gold paint; he acquires a red sports car; there is a gang rape. In a scene apparently intended as comic relief, the pregnant Montezuma gives birth to laptop computers, iPads and other symbols of the virtual age. Montezuma

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eventually disappears, Cortés commits suicide, and their voices blend in a duet from beyond the grave.

You have to admire Salzburg for its tenacity in tackling a work so determined not to provide conventional entertainment. The pseudo-intellectual libretto proved pretentious, the music too sparse and fragmentary to trigger any emotional response. Konwitschny's brilliance ultimately was swamped by the score's tedium. Angela Denoke and Bo Skovhus, each backed by two other singers, including the ethereal high soprano Susanna Andersson, were superb as the protagonists. Leading the ORF Radio Symphony Orchestra Vienna, Ingo Metzmacher, who conducted the premiere in Hamburg years ago, ensured that the music sounded as good as it could. --- George Loomis, ft.com

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