The Battle for Quality

The Strange Career of Gerard Mortier

Toni Morisson and Gerard Mortier at *An American Memory* (New York City Opera, September 2007).

Gerard Mortier is currently regarded as an important authority in the international opera world. He has directed both the prestigious Salzburg Festival and the Paris Opera. As I write this, that still seems rather unreal. The principal reason for this is that Gerard Mortier comes from a country that had no great reputation for opera. He himself was born in Ghent, in East Flanders, in 1943, and his initial contacts with the world of opera consisted of visits to the local company. It was the epitome of a provincial house, where opera was put on for enthusiasts who turned a blind eye to the poor theatrical quality, imposed few musical criteria, yet still dressed up in their Sunday best to go and listen to a beautiful aria. In the cultural life of Flanders and Belgium the Ghent opera was a sort of relic from a dying tradition. And yet: accompanied by his mother, Mortier discovered important works there. Performances such as *The Magic Flute* lodged in his mind and fired his imagination. For him, opera was the most beautiful thing in the world.

Ghent Opera.

A painful imperfection

But the child became an adolescent and felt more and more dissatisfied. The painful imperfection aroused in him an insatiable hunger for quality which was to determine his whole future life. With a little money in his pocket he went to Salzburg, and what he saw there made such an impression that for the rest of his life Mozart would remain a genius to be worshipped.

When he was studying at Ghent University he got to know Jan Briers, one of his professors. Briers was a leading figure with Flemish radio, and was equally well aware of the deficiencies in the musical life of Ghent. He had established the Flanders Festival with a view to effecting radical improvements, and when he found among his students someone with a great passion for music, he immediately enlisted him in his organisation.

Meanwhile, the young Gerard Mortier had developed a rich and multi-faceted view of the evolution of music and cultural life. Jan Briers' tastes were conservative, but his young colleague was convinced that a major festival must also include contemporary composers. When Mortier had work by Ligeti performed in Ghent, it was seen as a sort of heroic gesture. Of course he also wanted to put on opera performances, to show the locals that opera was a fully-fledged theatrical form. So he had the Prague Opera perform Leoš Janáček's *The Cunning Little Vixen* in that temple of bad taste: the Ghent Opera House. He also firmly believed in the talents of a young Flemish stage-manager, Gilbert Deflo, whom he asked to create a 'modern' production. Both Janáček and Deflo would play a significant part in his later career.

Culture and democracy

Through his activities as the person responsible for the Festival's programme he made international contacts; he also found work in Germany. It seemed then that he had said his final farewell to Ghent, Flanders and Belgium, because for him Germany was a sort of operatic and theatrical paradise. Frankfurt, Hamburg and Düsseldorf were outstanding training grounds for the future cultural administrator. Later he would complete his apprenticeship in Paris.

At that time much of his thinking on opera and culture had already taken shape. Mortier sees culture as one of the significant gauges of a democratic community. The artist's imagination nourishes the political debate. Culture is perpetually evolving. Therefore a cultural experience based on nostalgia or routine is totally wrong. But Mortier also knows that conservative forces are a powerful presence in the cultural world. They are his enemies, be they sponsors, big recording companies, egotistical stars, politicians or undemanding audiences. Consequently, he sees his own efforts as a battle. This explains why he so frequently and so readily takes part in the cultural debate. In doing so he does not eschew controversy, and an aggressive stance in the public arena often seems to be his trade mark. Moreover, he has always wanted as many people as possible to be able to share in the artistic achievements that sustained his own life and thinking. He has constantly sought to reach out to a broader public, both to young people and to social classes who had not yet discovered opera.

In strictly operatic terms, this meant that Mortier was looking for a particular kind of director. One who would be prepared to come up with a new take on an existing work. Cultural criticism, as practised mainly by German directors post-1968, provided Mortier with fertile ground. The great monuments of culture, say the operas of Mozart, are often buried under a noncommittal approach in which dazzle, good taste and elegance are paramount. But Mortier is convinced that in his own time Mozart was revolutionary and subversive. If Mozart is to retain his significance today, the director must search the text and the score for these contrary elements. If Mozart is critical of the society he lived in (think for instance of *Le Nozze di Figaro*) then he is putting at risk the acceptability of the *ancien régime* and already heralding the modern period. And it is precisely from the perspective of this – now existing – modern period that today's spectator looks back on the work. So every historical text needs to be examined from two points of view: from the time when it was created and from the present situation. Only in this way can a score from the great tradition be of significance for today's audience.

Opera for the twentieth century

When the post of director of the Muntschouwburg in Brussels became vacant in 1981, Mortier applied for the position with the intention of turning his ideas into reality. In the Belgian cultural context of the time this was a radical volte-face. The company Mortier inherited was not getting a very good press just then, the weakest link being undoubtedly the orchestra. Mortier knew the standard had to be cranked up, and here he had the opportunity for a thorough reorganisation. He needed to look for suitable conductors and succeeded in attracting the Englishman John Pritchard to the company. Pritchard offered both musicality and expertise, together with considerable familiarity with an operatic orchestra. Alongside the experienced conductor Mortier placed a young and very promising French talent: Sylvain Cambreling. As well as the orchestra, the chorus too was in need of rejuvenation.

Once all this was done, Mortier had at his command an instrument fit to produce opera for the twentieth century. During the 1980s the Muntschouwburg blossomed amazingly. Mortier opened the doors wide to international talent. He linked up with the German tradition of stage-management by setting Karl-Ernst

Muntschouwburg, Brussels

and Ursula Hermann to work in Brussels. Hermann had been Peter Stein's scenographer at the Schaubüne in Berlin, a company then at the highest level of German theatre. In Brussels Hermann for the first time had the opportunity to direct a production. With astounding productions of Mozart's *La Clemenza di Tito* and *Don Giovanni,* his work immediately won international acclaim.

Mortier also managed to entice Peter Stein, Herbert Wernicke and Patrice Chéreau to Brussels. With talents like these the Muntschouwburg could regularly be relied on to provide unforgettable evenings. As an ardent film buff he believed that film directors could come up with surprises when least expected. He dreamed of commissioning Fellini or Coppola, and did manage to persuade the Belgian film-maker André Delvaux to direct Debussy's *Pelléas et Mélisande*. We must also add to the list the American Peter Sellars, when he was still a young and unknown *enfant terrible*. This young director made a modern version for Brussels of *Giulio Cesare* by Handel – yet another composer of operas who was being rediscovered at the time. Because Mortier was convinced that opera could only avoid being branded museum art if new work too was being created, he asked Sellars, together with the American John Adams, to write a work about an acute present-day problem. This was *The Death of Klinghoffer* (1991) with a libretto based on real-life events. It set Israelis and Palestinians against each other and set off a heated debate in the United States, as a result of which Adams and Sellars were accused of anti-Semitism. Since then this opera has developed into one of the classics of the twentieth century. That the work fuelled a political discussion strengthened Mortier's belief that modern opera can have a place at the centre of society.

A fresh wind in Germany

The successes in Brussels gave Mortier considerable influence in Belgium. Since he presented himself as a visionary, those in power often called on him. He collaborated on new directions for Belgian orchestras and reorganised the Flemish Opera in Antwerp and Ghent – a task which gave Mortier particular satisfaction because it gave him the opportunity of ensuring properly produced opera not just in the city where he was born but also in 'his' first opera house.

But his reputation was not confined to Belgium. In 1991 he was invited to direct the prestigious Salzburg Festival. Although as a young man he had

discovered high-quality opera in this city, he was nonetheless now convinced that the festival was too respectable and too bourgeois. Salzburg, once the dream of Max Reinhardt and Richard Strauss, had degenerated into the place where Austrian high society held its annual get-together. Mortier wanted to change that drastically. Salzburg needed to connect with contemporary artistic practice. To begin with Mortier put an end to the reign of Herbert van Karajan, once the festival's idol. He let it be known that big-name performers – and so also the big record companies – were no longer welcome at the festival unless they were prepared to cooperate with the new artistic policy. The outcome was that the likes of Ricardo Muti or Pavarotti were no longer to be seen in Salzburg. They were replaced by the artistic friends who had made Brussels such a success. As conductors he chose Sylvain Cambreling, his comrade from Brussels, and Christoph von Dohnányi, the man who had first given him his opportunities in Germany, together with Nikolaus Harnoncourt, the man behind the revival of baroque music. Of course Peter Sellars, Patrice Chéreau, Herbert Wernicke and Mr and Mrs Hermann also accompanied him to Mozart's city. And Mortier discovered the work of Christoph Marthaler and Jossie Wieler.

Festspielhaus, Salzburg.

Mortier also had an ambition to build up a more adventurous theatre programme. In the Low Countries he found two directors whom he considered well worth introducing to an international public. He got Luc Perceval to make a German version of a successful adaptation of Shakespeare's history plays, under the title of *Schlachten*. He also invited the Dutchman Johan Simons to bring to Salzburg his stage production of Visconti's *La Caduta degli Dei* – a piece that dealt with the Nazi past, and was of special relevance in Salzburg. Both directors clearly made a great impression in the German-speaking world, because Perceval will become the artistic director of the Thaliatheater in Hamburg in September 2009 and Johan Simons of the Kammerspiele in Munich in 2010.

Looking back on the Salzburg period, we can see that Mortier made his mark on events there. Naturally this also involved a good deal of heated debate. The innovative opera productions were promptly labelled 'Eurotrash'. He was forever having to defend his ideas to a board of directors that favoured a more circumspect policy. In doing so he had constantly to call on one of his chief talents: his powers of persuasion. Particularly when Mortier attacked the rise in right-wing extremism, he found himself in the eye of a storm. But there, too, we see how consistent he is: if art is to stand surety for a healthy democracy, then artists and those who manage the art must also defend these principles outside the theatre, in the public forum.

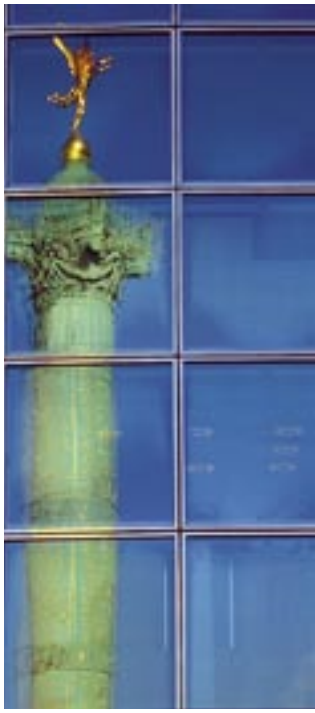
In posh and pricy Salzburg he wanted to reach a different audience. So he set up a tent in a working-class district and put on *Die Zauberflöte* in it. This was mainly an indication of his good intentions, because now the ladies in expensive outfits paraded past modest little dwellings on their way to Mozart. But these actions did succeed in attracting the attention of policy-makers in the Ruhr. Around Essen and Bochum there are a great many empty factory buildings, and the intention is to use them for cultural purposes. The idealist vision is that the former workers will now come to performances in premises with which they are familiar. It is culture open to all, but then culture of the highest quality. After Mortier left Salzburg, he seemed to be exactly the right person to carry out this plan. And here too we saw Chéreau, Peter Sellars or Johan Simons at work. Mortier formulated a clear policy, which still forms the basis for the continued existence of this Ruhr Triennial.

Boos in the Bastille

After the empty factories of the Ruhr, Paris and its opera beckoned. In the 1980s Mortier had been very much involved in drawing up the plans for the Bastille, a gigantic theatre that could appeal to a broader public, exactly in line with Mortier's intentions. Expansion was the buzzword of Jack Lang, the then Minister of Culture, and of Pierre Boulez. So it was with great ambitions that Mortier moved to the Paris opera in 2004. Now that he is leaving the company in 2009, this Parisian adventure leaves a sour taste in the mouth. The Parisian first-night public did not like what they were offered, and there was nothing they enjoyed more than protesting noisily. Bastille and '*Boo*' became synonymous. That certainly surprised Mortier, because he had thought to find the French capital more open-minded. In the end there were two sides to the story. The press and the first-night audience were often downright hostile, even when there was no reason for it. But once the 'ordinary' public came to look, some of those rubbished productions were very successful. An opera director has of course to learn to live with that first-night audience. Mortier would not do so; he wanted to argue it all out. Some of his friends advised him not to take the negative reactions too much to heart, but then they failed to take his temperament into account. It did nothing to improve the relationship.

So his time in Paris was not an unmixed success. It hurt him badly. As ever, his artistic friends had followed in his wake. Initially Mortier put on productions that he himself was proud of. It looked as though he was playing safe, but that too was a miscalculation. Marthaler had created a startlingly original *Katia Kabanova* for him in Salzburg. The Parisian public reacted with hostility. Later he came up with some particularly interesting initiatives. For instance, with Handel's *Hercule* Luc Bondy delivered one of the finest productions ever seen of a baroque opera. He asked the Austrian filmmaker Michael Haeneke to produce *Don Giovanni*; the result was an impressive, dark version of Mozart's opera. The first-night audience turned their noses up at it, vociferously; but despite that Haeneke's original approach can be sure of finding a place in the rich history of this opera's productions. A rare exception was *Tristan und Isolde*, in which Peter Sellars co-operated with video artist Bill Viola. Not only was the production musically of the very highest quality, but visually it exerted a strange and mysterious power. And for once its quality did not escape the Parisian audience. But that did not alter the fact that there was a gulf between the product, the director and a large section of the public. A real faction fight, one might call it, without in any way criticising the director's choices. In this case it was the public that became disenchanted. But Mortier, stubborn as he is, stuck firmly to the course he had marked out. That he held so firmly to his vision in often difficult circumstances truly merits our admiration.

Opéra Bastille, Paris.



Financial constraints

On leaving Paris he has faced two further disillusionments. He wanted a Music Forum for Ghent. It was to be an institution for the twentieth century. He wanted to bring to it all his experience as a visionary cultural administrator. The project proved too expensive for his native city, and it was turned down. Also, for a very long time Mortier had dreamed of working in the United States. Now it seemed

he would have the opportunity, when he was offered the job of running the New York City Opera, an institution which was in desperate straits. Straightaway Mortier formulated a – by American norms - revolutionary concept. He wanted to introduce work from the twentieth century and new operas. He immediately commissioned a piece on Walt Disney from Peter Sellars and John Adams, and wanted to have the film *Brokeback Mountain* reworked as an opera. But when the

Teatro Real, Madrid.

board of directors saw the financial implications of the plan, they were horrified. Moreover it seemed that sponsors, without whom there is no cultural life in New York, were not eager to step into the unknown. They preferred to talk about *Aida* rather than Messiaen. Mortier felt compelled to relinquish the position.

These two last instances have certain features in common. Mortier has constantly sought to launch new ideas, but time and time again he has come up against financial constraints. His whole career has been characterised by this, but in many cases he has managed to persuade the authorities to invest more resources in culture. In Ghent, however, the subsidising authorities decided that the proposal was just too large for them. And in America Mortier realised that until then it was the European system of support for artists that had made his artistic dreams come true. One cannot emphasise enough just how much artistic space this European system of subsidies makes available.

Happily, consolation came from a rather unexpected quarter. Madrid's opera house was looking for a new director. The Spaniards made Mortier a very attractive proposal. In Madrid he would have at his disposal the same budget as he had had in Paris. So once again he would be free to go his own way. The situation he has found in the Spanish capital suits him down to the ground. The opera there is of a conservative nature. So the battle to create opera that is exciting and relevant to the twenty-first century can be fought again on a new battlefield.

So everyone has nothing but praise for Mortier as an authority, a source of inspiration and a moderniser; people describe him as enthusiastic, visionary, tireless, original and gifted. But sometimes his dreams have fallen foul of harsh reality. The pity of it is that the reverses in Ghent and New York should have happened at a time when he could display a brilliant record of service. He is now sixty-five years old, but has no intention of resting on his laurels. Other opportunities are beckoning: Los Angeles has already approached him, and then of course there is Madrid. On his birthday Mortier said with a sigh that he will now be taking things a bit more quietly. Not that any of his friends believed that for a moment. And a single phone call from Madrid changed the outlook radically. An active senior citizen like Mortier can only be good for opera as a whole. ■

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