

Austria

Bregenz

Of all the rare operas revived and rescued during David Pountney's decade-long tenure as Intendant of the BREGENZ FESTIVAL, André Tchaikowsky's *The Merchant of Venice*, unearthed this year, may prove to be the most valuable. Few gathered in the FESTSPIELHAUS for the premiere on July 18 can have been fully prepared for the impact it would make—with every note in the long score seeming to signify something—and indeed little in the modest output of this Polish-born British pianist-composer would have indicated it either. Although that output includes some strong works, including the Piano Concerto that was premiered by Radu Lupu at the Royal Festival Hall in 1975, *The Merchant of Venice*, with its running time of about three hours (including an interval), is conceived on an altogether more ambitious scale; besides, how many composers get their first operas right? Tchaikowsky laboured on his for a number of years yet never got to hear it. He died of cancer in Oxford in 1982, aged 46, famously bequeathing his skull to the RSC for use in performances of *Hamlet*.

A complex, troubled and largely forgotten character, Tchaikowsky is eminently worth the effort Bregenz put into his opera (a symposium and concerts of his music were also on the programme). Born Robert Andrzej Krauthammer in Warsaw and smuggled out of the Ghetto by his grandmother under the name of Czajkowski, he survived to enjoy early success as a pianist, even becoming a finalist in the 1955 Chopin Competition and earning the support of Arthur Rubinstein. (The class of '55 remains legendary: Adam Harasiewicz was placed first, Vladimir Ashkenazy second and Fou Ts'ong third; other finalists alongside Czajkowski included Peter Frankl and Tamas Vasary.) When Andrzej Czajkowski began to tour America and make records for RCA, the impresario Sol Hurok insisted he change his name to André Tchaikowsky. Hence some understandable confusion with those other composers Boris Tchaikovsky, Alexander Tchaikovsky and a certain Pyotr Ilyich.

Yet this restitution at Bregenz—where Tchaikowsky joins Szymanowski and Weinberg to form a notable thread of Polish composers featured in recent

OPERA AROUND THE WORLD



■ *The premiere of André Tchaikowsky's 'The Merchant of Venice' at Bregenz, with (l.) Adrian Eröd as Shylock, (centre) Richard Angas as the Doge, (on the table) Christopher Ainslie as Antonio and (far r.) Charles Workman as Bassanio*

years — should help to clear up the confusion and re-establish André Tchaikowsky in his own right. He is also receiving attention in the form of Anastasia Belina-Johnson's biography, recently published in German as *André Tchaikowsky: Die tägliche Mühe ein Mensch zu sein* and due out in English in November. Meanwhile, the downloadable e-book *The Other Tchaikowsky—A Biographical Sketch of André Tchaikowsky* by David A. Ferré is also exhaustively researched and gives insights into the composer's desperate attempts to interest ENO in *The Merchant of Venice*. After a playthrough for Lord Harewood and Mark Elder just before Christmas 1981, Tchaikowsky made a note in his diary about 'a dark young man of such beauty on every level': he was referring to David Pountney, who has now returned the compliment by staging his opera.

Though *The Merchant of Venice* has inspired several other operatic settings—including Foerster's *Jessika*, Hahn's *Le Marchand de Venise* and Castelnuovo-Tedesco's *Il mercante di Venezia*—the scarcity of English Shakespearian operas makes this one all the more precious. Like Hahn and Castelnuovo-Tedesco, Tchaikowsky was Jewish, and the attraction of this play, with its infamous associations of anti-Semitism, may not be immediately obvious, yet in John O'Brien's Shakespeare-derived libretto the characterization of Shylock is sympathetic. (As a politically-conscious South African, O'Brien's sensitivity should not be underestimated here.) A victim of his own making, like many tragic figures, Shylock is nevertheless much more of a scapegoat than a villain, and in Keith Warner's superb production, the designer Ashley Martin-Davis ensured that the character bore more than a passing resemblance to Tchaikowsky himself. (Warner made at least one other clever biographical allusion: in the Act 2 contest for Portia's hand, the unlucky Prince of Morocco, a dancing role, pulled a skull out of the casket.) The opera also appears to play up slightly the homoerotic aspect of Antonio's friendship with Bassanio, as it seems likely that Tchaikowsky was aligning himself with both Shylock and the depressed Antonio.

In predominantly silver-black-grey colours, the settings for the first act evoked a world of financial dealings: giant bank vaults and safes shifted around the stage on which we first encountered Shylock sitting among all the other men at rows of desks. Masked revellers, some wearing peaked *capirotes* and others running with flaming torches, established a sense of community tension, and indeed the costuming seemed to evoke the time of the Dreyfus Affair. In contrast, the more feminine Belmont—Portia's domain—introduced colour before it was back to the all-male world for the trial scene. Warner's direction was unfailingly elegant, capturing the fast-moving wit of the middle act while never shirking the cruelty elsewhere, and he brought clarity to the complex plot.

These contrasts are also all mirrored in Tchaikovsky's darkly lyrical score, which inhabits a world somewhere around Berg and Britten while sounding unlike either. The comic side of the work finds unexpected musical expression, and Tchaikovsky sneaks in some witty quotations without ever overdoing them: a fanfare from *Leonore* No. 3 and a snatch from (the other) Tchaikovsky's Fourth Symphony make fleeting appearances, while Wagner's 'Ring' Leitmotif accompanies Portia's giving of a ring to Bassanio. The orchestration, complete at the composer's death but for the last 24 bars (filled in by the composer Alan Boustead), calls for an onstage band in Act 2 that includes recorders, lute and harpsichord. At Bregenz, the music was in the strong yet sensitive hands of Erik Nielsen, whose work with an attentive Vienna Symphony Orchestra contributed significantly to the success of the evening.

So, too, did the outstanding cast. Adrian Eröd's poignantly powerful Shylock stood out—his strongly focused baritone even across a wide range—but never at the expense of the others. In the title role, Christopher Ainslie's smallish yet attractively grainy countertenor underlined Antonio's vulnerability, and Charles Workman brought confident, ringing tone to Bassanio. Kathryn Lewek supplied bright coloratura as Jessica and was well matched by Jason Bridges's tenor Lorenzo, and the soprano Magdalena Anna Hofmann made a pearly-toned Portia in a lively double act with the mezzo Verena Gunz's Nerissa. The three bass-baritone roles of Salerio and Solanio—portrayed as a snooping journalist-photographer duo—and Gratiano were well filled by Adrian Clarke, Norman D. Patzke and David Stout, and Richard Angas was a gruff Doge of Venice. Everyone worked hard for the small number of performances, so it must be hoped that they will get to repeat their parts when the production travels to Warsaw and—if Pountney has his way—eventually to Cardiff. It deserves to be widely seen.