

Berlin

Okay, listen carefully because I don't want to have to repeat myself. If you are American you are immediately to turn the page, or two if necessary, because you're not supposed to be reading this. Now before you dive to your laptops to fire off letters about what an 'aggravating', 'culturally superior' 'innuendo'-devious, 'Doctor Goebbels'-type I am (to quote exclusively from my favourite correspondents), let me point out that this has really nothing to do with me. You see, it's like this. When I rang and asked for a ticket for the last performance of *Einstein on the Beach* at the STAATS BANK on August 31, I was asked which magazine I scribble for and whether it was published in the United States. So I said, 'Well, yes, it's certainly read all over the place from Bombay to Brooklyn ...', and the press officer then said that she would have to talk to 'The Publishers' and get back to me. True to her word she did, and I was allowed a ticket on account of the 'Limney Connection'—although I'm not really 'one of those' either. I asked, of course, what all this was about. I knew that Mr Glass and Mr Wilson had put some kind of block on productions and I thought that maybe they had it in for their fellow countrymen. And she sort of confirmed this. But when later I met Berthold Schneider (The Producer) he led me to believe it was because the creators were planning a production in the US in a couple of years and didn't want any publicity now that might deflect attention later. Well, if you'll believe *that*, you'll believe anything. What is certainly clear is that no American should know anything about what has happened here, and therefore I must repeat my request that you desist immediately and go back to mixing Waldorf salads or Screwdrivers or whatever it is you do. No cultural stereotyping here!

Well, now that *they've* gone, I can explicitly state what *you* have already guessed. We have for our defecation *Einstein on the Beach* by Philip Glass and Robert Wilson. It was 'staged' in the empty GDR Staatsbank—a dilapidated monster in East Berlin—by a group of young musicians, drenched in talent, whose title might be given in English as 'The Laboratory for Applied Music'. And it was an Event and, moreover, a very notable one. It was my first time for this opera but I am quite sure that this production bore not a jot of similarity to any other. Schneider and the musical director, Benjamin Meyers, have simply extinguished the conventional parameters of theatre. They spread the thing out over three floors of the Staatsbank, employing a variety of artists to set up videos in smaller rooms. The musicians (players and singers) moved from floor to floor; the 'audience' were forced to be peripatetic and occasionally, via hand-held video cameras, were enmeshed in the performance. You could give up and go to the bar, which stayed open the whole evening and did excellent business, but there were videos there too and the music was, in any case, piped throughout the building. In the main hall there were a few rows of chairs—facing a bare wall, naturally—and in the cellar, where a carpet of real grass had been laid, there were air-mattresses where the overwhelmingly young and very self-aware 'radical' Berlin audience could couple down when feeling shagged-out or randy.

Yes, I know: there are masses of problems with this sort of thing and I don't want to minimize them. The overall feeling was that of being in an installation and frankly I distrust installations greatly. Too often I suspect that a lack of serious talent is being masked by the conceited assumption that the detritus of the artist's life is of deep interest to us. There comes a point when even a screwed up piece of blank paper lying in any empty bank-safe is supposed to be laden with significance, and this was very much my response to a lot of the video displays here. Likewise there can be no real sense of musical balance. The highly controlled mathematical minimalist score (astoundingly played and sung) came over as acoustically unstable, setting up (welcome?) tensions which one would have thought contradicted the fundamental

principles of the method. There were also some technical problems. The banal English texts that Wilson used were mostly ditched and one or two of the singers were given text-cards which were different for each performance. However, these German texts were even more difficult to hear than the English ones on the recording. The 'Paris' text, however, did survive. In fact it was the tape used in the recording, unfortunately now in very poor condition.

Nonetheless, the critic is in real danger, when faced with something as extreme as this, of ending up complaining that the lemon doesn't taste like an orange. So, in the spirit of taking things on their own terms (and this event did have the imprimatur of the creators!), let's be enthusiastic.

The chief, and striking, effect of Schneider's radical method is an absolute uncoupling of the work from its meagre—but clearly given—narrative elements. There are no characters at all; no Einstein and no 'stage'. The violinist (the splendid Nicole Reich) has no extant symbolic role. The train/trial/space-ship/sitting-on-a-bench-waiting-for-a-bus concepts are not *explicitly* employed and there is no sense that the opera—to quote Glass's gloss on his own work—'begins with a 19th-century train and ends with a 20th-century space-ship'. True, the major video screen, while often projecting formulae, trigonometry or atomic structures, does also indicate qualities which can be linked—just—to Wilson's chief ideas, and there *is* that grass in the cellar ... the 'field'? But this is performance art which successfully and intriguingly catapults you into the realm of abstractions.

The music came over as remarkable—in two senses. First, because it simply is so in the literal sense of the word, and second because it did not have the effect that one expected, having read of other performances and having listened to it at home. It was not nearly so 'incantatory' (to use Andrew Porter's term), nor did it feel so repetitive. Being always placed oddly, being often surrounded by the musicians (and how on earth do they keep time?!), was wonderfully dislocating. There was a sense of freedom, of expressiveness and, at times, of being overwhelmed by the rich organ-like quality of the score, which—frankly—amounted to the opposite of the whole minimalist project. For instance, we were told in the German programme-book that *Einstein on the Beach* obliterates the traditional antagonism between Aria and Ensemble. Well, come on now. We knew *that* beforehand. Yet oddly, when in Act 4 Scene 2 ('Bed') the female voice delivered her long solo, the aesthetic effect was wholly that of an aria. And damn fine and moving it was too. Indeed, the aesthetic pleasure that Schneider and Meyers and their dazzling musicians engendered, far from corresponding to all the radical assumptions of the work, of the production, of the building, of the whole rather self-obsessed paraphernalia of the 'Event' and its audience, was shamelessly and delightfully conventional. And at the end I was sad that I had been compelled to postpone my visit until the last performance, so that a second 'experience' was not possible.

BARRY EMSLIE

Göttingen

After last year's jubilee celebrations—a new production of *Rodelinda* to mark the 80th anniversary of the modern Handel opera renaissance at Göttingen with the same opera in 1920—the world's first Handel festival pulled off another coup for the beginning of its ninth decade: or would have done, if piqued maverick British Nardelians had not broken the embargo on what was supposed to have been the