

## **WORKING ON A RETURN**

Alberto Manguel

Some time in the spring of 2009 (stupidly, I didn't mark the exact date in my journal), Oscar Strasnoy called me and asked if I'd like to work with him on an opera, commissioned by the Festival of Aix-en-Provence for the summer of 2010. I had worked with Oscar once before, five years earlier, after receiving a letter from the people at Wigmore Hall in London, saying that Oscar had been asked to compose a cycle of songs for the Hall's reopening, and that he had chosen me as the librettist. I had not heard of Oscar's work before --my knowledge of contemporary classic music is shamefully poor-- and looked for some of his compositions. I found his "profane cantata" based on Kafka's diaries, a strange, haunting piece that vaguely reminded me of Stravinsky's *Les Noces*. With more chutzpah than conviction in my abilities, I accepted. Oscar had told the Wigmore Hall people that he wanted someone who was not a poet but a writer of prose, someone who would not impose too strong a rhythm to the text and who, at the same time, would develop an idea or argument that he could translate into music. The result of that first collaboration was *Six Songs for the Unquiet Traveller* which premiered in London in 2004 with soprano Ann Murray and the Nash Ensemble, conducted by Paul Kildea. It was the first time I heard my words sung and it was a revelatory experience. Words spoken are affected by the tone and the gestures of the speaker,

words on the page by the context of the reader, and yet they remain at the core of the creative act. But words sung hold little authority except as part of the entire web of sound, in spite of the sense and in spite of the meaning, merely as another instrument in the whole ensemble. I had no doubt understood this, listening to songs before, but never as powerfully as when the words I myself had written changed, dissolved, broke down in the flow of the music. It was certainly a most humbling experience.

Writing the words for a few songs is one thing; writing for an entire opera is something else. I was terrified. Oscar had in mind two of my short novels (neither of them published in English, but available in French, Spanish and several other languages) as the basis for the libretto. The first was *The Overdiscriminating Lover*, the story of a bathhouse employee in Poitiers during the early twentieth century, a shy man obsessed with erotic details; the second, *A Return*, was a retelling of Aeneas's story, in which a South American exile returns to his country thirty years after the military dictatorship, to find that the dead are still living and that the woman he abandoned has not forgiven him.

After much discussion, we settled for *A Return* since it allowed Oscar to play with a greater number of characters and voices (*The Overdiscriminating Lover* is, in effect, a one-man story.) I sketched out a brief outline and Oscar sent it on to the

head of the Festival, Bernard Foccroulle, and to the director, Thierry Thieù Niang. Foccroulle liked the sketch but thought that there were too many scenes in it. In a note dated 8 August 2009, e-mailed from Geneva Airport, he wrote to Oscar: "If your opera lasts 55 minutes, that would mean 7 minutes per scene. Should we not make a more radical choice, leave out the non-essential elements, trust the music and the theatrical play to develop the operatic emotion?"

I followed Foccroulle's advice. If writing the novel was a process of layering stories (the realm of ghosts over that of memory, the relationship of the South American protagonist, Fabris, with the woman he betrayed, Marta, over the one told in Virgil's poem, the rekindling of unrequited love and the shadows of the military dictatorship), writing the libretto appeared to be one of stripping stories away, of reducing the argument to a few passionate essentials. The words sung would stress or clarify certain dramatic moments, and hint at the nuances of certain scenes, but the action itself would be carried by the music.

Niang imagined the costumes and décor somewhat in the style of the painter James Ensor, "a frightening carnival in a world between two worlds," as he put it. What was important, he thought, was to conjure up a ghostly atmosphere that would slowly impose itself over what seems at first a banal trip home. In the beginning, everything is real: the airport, the overhead

announcements, the passport inspection, the search for a taxi. Slowly that "documentary" reality begins to disintegrate: Fabris is taken to the wrong hotel, he gets lost in a stream of people hurrying blindly down the street, he meets old friends whom he thought had long died or disappeared. "Realism in an opera is a serious problem," Oscar wrote to me, "but I'm sure we'll be able to avoid it bravely."

To suggest the nightmarish world slowly seeping in, I thought of having the loudspeaker at the airport begin their announcements in English, French, Spanish and gradually slip into Latin. The early use of Latin would allow me later to have some of the characters quote Virgil since, according to Oscar, Latin is a wonderful language to sing. So is Spanish, to a lesser degree, and I had the people Fabris meets in the city of his past speak Spanish. But the Aix Festival wanted French to be, if not the main language, then at least one of the languages sung. Oscar didn't like sung French (he preferred Italian or German,) so we decided to compromise. In the novel, Fabris's exile was in Italy; France, however, would do just as well. I therefore had Fabris sing his responses in French. Now we had Latin, Spanish and French as the opera's languages.

By September, I had written three more drafts, but Oscar was still worrying that the descent into the fantastic was not gradual enough. "I think that what works in the novel," he wrote

to me on the 14th, "and what, for the time being, I don't manage to see in the adaptation, is how, from a few banal elements, one falls *little by little* into the dreamlike Virgilian situation. In the adaptation, I feel that the dream situation is there from the very start, and that it will be difficult to sustain a continuous hallucination, as if it were more like a fixed texture than a dramatic progression. I prefer the idea of a *spiral* (descending) as it is apparent in the book, rather than the idea of this unbroken texture that the writing now suggests."

I reworked the early scenes, aiming at that "spiral" that Oscar had in mind. To increase the sense of a descent (into Hell, into the past, into the realm of things unresolved,) I alternated dialogues and monologues with choruses, the former more "realistic", the latter more "fantastic." Oscar liked the device. He felt that the crowd scenes helped lend the whole a "lyrical intensity" and forced the characters to "start again" at every turn with what he called the "reshuffled" themes. "A sort of *rondeau*," he writes, "seems to me well adapted to the form that the libretto is acquiring: A-B-A-C-A-D-A-E (with A as the choral constant that reabsorbs the individuals, and B,C,D,E the dialogues and monologues that further the plot.)"

Eventually, Fabris is led to the Underworld (which in the novel I described as a vast country club) where military criminals and their victims mingle. Led by an old professor who

had taught Fabris in high school, he meets several of the notorious torturers and murderers who sing proudly of their deeds. I backed each of their monologues with a traditional children's song which I thought would add horror to the pronouncements, but Oscar found it difficult to write music for what had already a melody of its own, and asked me to invent fresh nursery rhymes, which I did. I also suggested using the laughter from Purcell's *Dido and Aeneas* to underscore the Virgilian tone of a certain scene, but Oscar thought that the intervention of the chorus sufficed. I agreed.

By March 2010, the script was finished. Oscar asked me to change a few more details: to introduce a little more Latin in the scene in the Underworld; to add a few more lines to the scene where Fabris meets his old schoolmates; not to use the word "*rebencazo*" ("blow with a whip") because, Oscar said, "words that end with *-azo* are disagreeable to sing. Don't ask me why -- perhaps because they remind me of Los Chalchaleros" (a famous Argentinian folk group).

During the composition of *Six Songs for the Unquiet Traveller*, Oscar would come to my house and play the parts he had finished for me to hear what the words sounded like when coupled with the music. This time, it was different. Oscar composed the music for *A Return* during his travels (in Russia,

in Israel, in Mexico,) and we didn't have the chance to meet and put our work together, and hear what the pairing sounded like.

Wagner spoke of the *Gesamtkunstwerk* (the "whole work of art") as the opera's ideal, music and words and action and sets combining to form one grand multifaceted beast. To this collaborative creation I can add one more participant: the public. *A Return* will premiere at Aix-en-Provence on 4 July 2010, and I will listen to *A Return* for the first time during the previews, and add to this *Gesamtkunstwerk* a hopeful ear and an attentive eye.

NOTE AFTER 4 JULY: I listened to Oscar's music, directed by Roland Hayrabedian, and saw the wonderful staging by Thierry Thieû Niang. I found it all extraordinary, and quite beyond anything I had done or could do myself alone. I'm immensely grateful to them all, and to the singers and musicians, for the experience.