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Chronicles

by françois cavailès

uruopera by Laurent Petitgirard

Opéra Nice Côte d'Azur / La Cuisine
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- [opera](#)



dominique jaussein

"Open / Open your eyes / Cross the threshold / Deliver yourself from the world."

Softly delivered by the Chœur de l'Opéra Nice Côte d'Azur, the invitation that opens *Guru* (2006-2009), Laurent Petitgirard's second opera (after *Joseph Merrick dit Elephant Man*, 1995-1998) finally resonates on a French stage. Freely inspired by the mass suicide in the North American Peoples Temple sect, cut off from the world in Jonestown in 1978, the three-act work was recorded in 2010, before being performed in Poland in 2018. At the time of its national premiere, the musical discovery is striking, thanks in particular to the size of the cast and the space provided by La Cuisine, a new, well-equipped venue in Nice.

The short Prologue reveals a chorus both alert and narrating, dressed in light-toned or saffron-colored cottons - Rudy Sabounghi's sketchy but effective costumes and sets [read our reviews of. Halfway across the stage, a video screen dominates the singers, who benefit from the spaciousness of the proscenium, decorated as a wild beach. Pleasing in its theatrical fluidity and pertinent in its skilful use of the stage, the staging is a first foray into opera for Muriel Mayette-Holtz, director of the Théâtre National de Nice, co-producer of the show. The highly brassy Nice Philharmonic Orchestra, under the baton of Laurent Petitgirard at the back of the stage but lit to its advantage, immediately conveys the tension and disunity characteristic of the entry into the drama of this contemporary microcosm lost on the shores of a tropical island. A simple, warm-hearted man at first glance, the guru, surrounded by a few acolytes (Victor the assistant and Carelli the *scientist*) and his mother Marthe, an ex-girlfriend, Iris, and their child, as well as numerous adepts, both old and new, such as Marie, the sole rebel and the only character to

express herself *through* speech. This anti-operatic choice is not the happiest defended by Xavier Maurel's rather overloaded libretto, which aims to dig deeper into the psychological springs and reveal a complex spiral by relying on too few roles. The main Guru is the most developed, often verbose, played with virtuous energy and sometimes vicious audacity by baritone Armando Noguera.

Most of the pleasure comes from Petitgirard's music, which should be considered as a whole to better grasp its impressions. For example, the percussive excitement of the arrival of the seven new members of the sect (from the audience) as the choir invades the stage. Far from the tragic outcome, the action is carried out with a good sense of humanity, under the threat of brass and the rumble of percussion at the very moment of embrace. The shift from welcoming effort to incantation becomes increasingly apparent in the following duet (filmed and shown live on video) between Carelli and Victor, with tenor Frédéric Diquero giving the latter a slightly deformed treble that fills this strange figure with naturalness. Further still in the expression of a troubled charm, the master instrument seems to be the celesta, which accompanies the charismatic singing of Guru, the leader adored like a king under the accelerated obsequies of the choir lifted like a wave. The thick sound of double bass and percussion melts the muffled atmosphere, later soothed by *soprani* singing, almost *a capella*, for the enthronement of the young recruits.

This moving scene is followed, under a blazing sun, by Guru's anger towards a novice with an orange. The hero's breath, delivery and gradation of threat are remarkable, even more so than his speech about fear. The small, angry trio contrasts, as does the astonishing dance of bassoon, flute and percussion. The radicalism of the three partners is matched by Sonia Petrovna, Marie's only interpreter to date, amplified by a microphone. Guru seems to read her mind, a magic underlined by a sort of grandiose march. When he becomes Machiavellian, the music imbues us with a sense of danger. Then the orchestral storm rages on, lifted by the composer himself at the music stand, supported by low choirs before the confrontation between Guru and Iris, held by the clear soprano of Anaïs Constans. From the dispute to the agreement over the child, there is no violence in Guru's voice, but rather his charisma, still supported by the celesta. In Iris's fleeting revolt, the singer's eloquence again impresses, as do the orchestra's dark undulations. Left alone, Guru expresses himself in a hallucinatory dream suggested by the pit. Black birds fly by on the screen as the protagonist loses all reason - "*I am Eternity*".

A silky interlude and Act II introduces Marthe, with her strange lullaby and a curse recitative. Black nightmare, performed under a red light, a scene of simple language supported by Marie-Ange Todorovitch, whose quarrel with the adepts is conducted in orchestral stridency. Revoici Guru, gone mad. Nika Guliashvili's bass as Carelli brings us the *air of purified water*, the sect's fatal poison. After a mysterious prelude, all metamorphosis, Iris's *arietta*, *J'ai laissé mourir mon enfant (I have let my child die)*, a deeply moving introspection. Blue hues convey the poetry of the sea. In the twists and turns of the sad denouement, once the poison has been poured in, it's better to receive the orchestra's panicked shocks, tense then relaxed to the extreme, than the wise instructions of Marie, the sole survivor, overwhelmed on the shore, who concludes with a long howl. For Guru to burn in hell, the cooking fire is generous and *masterfully* regulated by Laurent Petitgirard.

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