

DÍAPASON

In Nice, the spellbinding powers of Laurent Petitgirard's "Guru".

By Emmanuel Dupuy - Published February 23, 2024 at 15:59

Muriel Mayette-Holtz stages the French premiere of the French composer's second opera in the Salle de la Cuisine, home of the Théâtre National de Nice, which she directs. With the Nice Philharmonic at the helm, she oversees a cast with no weak links, including baritone Armand Noguera.



Photo credit: Dominique Jausein

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Petitgirard's Guru

Two decades after the first French performances of his *Elephant Man*, Opéra de Nice takes on **Laurent Petitgirard's** second operatic work. *Guru* is unusual in that it was recorded as early as 2010 (for the Naxos label), well before its Polish stage premiere in 2018. Conceived by writer/director **Xavier Maurel**, the libretto explores the mechanisms of psychological control within a sect, whose followers are held in the grip of their own power.

on an island by a sulphurous, manipulative character, the notorious Guru. Despite the seriousness of the subject, the language is fluid, without heaviness or concession - the plot includes a rape, the murder of a baby, two scenes of strangulation and, at the end, a collective suicide. It flows naturally into a vocal writing style that respects prosody, but does not shy away from great expressive swerves, more elegiac lines or ensembles.

Recurring tension

This single-course work (performed without an intermission, it lasts two hours) is carried by an abundant orchestra (the Philharmonique de Nice, conducted by the composer), with textures in an unstuffy French tonality, bristling with percussive, modernist accents in the healthy tradition of Honegger, Jolivet or Landowski, in addition to numerous ostinato figures that maintain a recurrent tension. The choir, too, is much in demand, like a character in an oratorio, lending ritual colors to certain passages, led by a group of six new adepts (six perfect young singers) for whom Petitgirard reserves a few clever madrigal motifs. It is they who begin the long crescendo leading to the fatal denouement, with its implacable power, before the final bars that end in a sublime appeasement - a little spoiled by the (too) long wail of Marie, the spoken character, the only one to oppose Guru and survive.

Her antagonism with the chorus of followers, whom she tries in vain to bring to her senses, and then with Guru, gives rise to two of the opera's most gripping scenes. In total contrast, Iris, Guru's jilted lover, is entitled to the most lyrical passages, in particular a poignant lamento following the death of her child, whom the monster did not hesitate to sacrifice - a flesh-and-light soprano with stratospheric high notes, **Anaïs Constans** excels and overwhelms. Marthe (Guru's mother, whom he also ends up slaughtering) is adorned with the dark mezzo of a flawlessly valiant **Marie-Ange Todorovitch**.

Distinctive vocal characteristics

Petitgirard's aim is to give each character its own distinctive vocal character, contrasting the master's two accomplices: on the one hand, a deep bass (**Nika Guliashvili's**, opulent and phrased with a bow) for Carelli, a scientist who develops an absurd diet based on seawater, and who will administer to the followers the poison supposed to lead them to the "great voyage"; on the other hand, a high tenor for the venal Victor (a **Frédéric Diquero** who never loses his eloquence, even if he sometimes seems tested by the steepness of the writing).

But the main triumph of the evening remains baritone **Armando Noguera**, fabulous in the overwhelming role of Guru, alternating playful lyricism and spine-chilling dramatic outbursts, with a voice that combines muscle and legato, and phenomenal stamina. And a sculpture of words full of venom and irony, attitudes and smiles alternately carnivorous, frightening and pathetic.

Strict minimum

Muriel Mayette-Holtz directs the show at La Cuisine, the home of the Théâtre national de Nice, which she runs. As this venue has no pit, the orchestra is positioned on the stage, with no effect on acoustic balance. The singers move to the front of the stage, against a backdrop limited to the bare essentials: a barren earth floor, with a few weeds on either side and a pond in which toxic water stagnates. Overhead, a large horizontal screen shows the vastness of the ocean or the faces of the protagonists, particularly Guru, who, driven by his narcissism, seems to take pleasure in contemplating his reflection.

In such a sober setting, the fourth wall is abolished - indeed, the new adepts make their entrance from the bleachers, as if they were part of the audience. And the proximity to the audience is such as to preclude any overemphasis; the acuity of the acting is thus achieved through the looks, the meticulous gestures that give each character, chorus members included, their true psychological profile. So much the worse if the dying infant is a little too realistic - we prefer the otherwise suggestive image of the tiny coffin being carried from garden to courtyard. Muriel Mayette-Holtz organizes the oppressive in-camera setting with method and formidable efficiency, confronting viewers with the horror and their own fascination for Guru's evil spells.

Guru de Petitgirard. Nice, Salle de la Cuisine, February 22. Last performance on February 24.