

'Elektra': Opera as visual, vocal art

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Opera today is a visual as well as a vocal art.

That's why there's a Thomas C. Hase at Cincinnati Opera.

Hase is the opera's resident lighting designer, the one who can paint a whole scene red without a drop of paint.

That will come in handy in Richard Strauss' "Elektra," to be given its Cincinnati Opera premiere at 8 p.m. Wednesday and Saturday at Music Hall. The new production, designed by Dany Lyne ("Pelleas et Melisande," 2000), is directed by opera artistic director Nicholas Muni.

Based on the Greek tragedy by Sophocles, "Elektra" is no bedtime story. Klytemnestra, Queen of Mycenae, has murdered her husband Agamemnon on his return from the Trojan War. Daughter Elektra desires revenge, but only her brother Orest can do the deed, and he's been gone for eight years.

Elektra waits. Sister Chrysothemis craves domestic bliss. Klytemnestra holes herself up in the palace with lover Aegisth, knowing she'll get hers in due time. A report that Orest is dead delights mom, depresses Elektra. Orest returns in disguise, dispatches mom and Aegisth. Elektra drops dead with joy.

Hase's lighting tells the story along with the words, the music, the scenery and the singers — who, by the way, are the best on the "Elektra" market today: as Elektra, soprano Deborah Polaski, considered virtual owner of the role, soprano Inga Nielsen as Chrysothemis, soprano Anja Silja as Klytemnestra and baritone Robert Hale as Orest. German conductor Sebastian Weigle leads the Cincinnati Symphony Orchestra.

"I can show what's in a character's mind," said Hase, who made his debut with Cincinnati Opera in "Lucia" (1997) and among others, lighted "Jenufa" (1998), "The Turn of the Screw" (1999) and "Bluebeard's Castle/Erwartung" (2000).

"You can't do that with scenery, props or costumes. I can actually conjure up the force of what a character is projecting."

In "Elektra," he illuminates the troubled princess herself. Hase explained:

"Elektra collapses after being told of Orestes' death. Thereafter we enter a kind of surreal world, the idea being that either she's gone mad, or she's died already and these are her last images of things being fulfilled.

"When she falls, there's an intensely white, harsh pool of light on her, almost searing. As she awakes, that goes away and we introduce a footlight. Suddenly, we have big shadows of Elektra on the palace wall, and instead of a gray sky, an almost unworldly green.

"We go into a very strange world of color, introducing very strong greens, super deep purples. Through the following scenes, there are surreal angles, and it continues to get more and more fragmented. It culminates in Elektra getting exactly what she's been striving for — almost too much. After the second killing, blood fills the whole space. It goes an incredibly super-rich, blood red color, including the sky and the house, which becomes an inferno inside."

Muni describes the first part of the opera as "very naturalistic. It actually resembles the area around Agamemnon's tomb in Greece. It's like a rocky desert, quite jagged."

Elektra lives in the courtyard of the palace, which Lyne has modeled after a building from a coal plant in Germany. "It's Germany meets Greece. There are two rock formations that, over the course of the opera, slowly open up and Elektra's world, her sort of psychological house, gets revealed."

The lighting of the first part of the opera is "very harsh," said Hase, with "bleached white tones going into kind of a moonlit night. But it's a very white-blue, almost a non-color. Contrasting with this is the artificial torch light in the building upstairs."

Lighting design has come into its own over the last half-century, said Hase, who has degrees in history and literature from the University of Wisconsin and general art and aesthetics from the Institute of Film, Theater and Television Technology in Cologne, Germany.

"It used to be, and often still is in Europe, that the set designer set the lighting, and you had an electrician instruct people to put things up and deal with the technical designers. You didn't have a lighting designer *per se*."

Better and more affordable equipment and efforts by pioneering designers like Gilbert Hemsley at New York City Opera (an early mentor of Hase) changed that. So did technical advances in scenic design. "A set designer just cannot keep track of it all. That's essentially why lighting broke off. There was also a desire by the public to push the envelope visually."

All lighting designers have a different style, said Hase. "I don't do effects for effects' sake. I focus on the performers at hand, what they're doing and what the story is doing. I do a lot of high contrast stuff, but there are other designers where you'll only see soft light onstage and that works just as effectively."

As the opera's lighting designer, Hase spends about three months a year in Cincinnati (he and his wife live in Philadelphia). He also does a production a year for the Playhouse in the Park and one for Cincinnati Ballet.

"I look at all four operas and figure out the needs of each production. We come into Music Hall the week before the season begins, take everything down and load in for the opera. There's a certain amount of lighting units that's focused for the whole season. Then we have specialty fixtures for each production. Mid-season, we take those down and put up the second half of the season.

"During lighting rehearsals, we set things, which fixtures are on and at what level, how quickly a cue comes in and goes away. All that is recorded into a lighting computer." In performance, the stage managers call the shots. "The show's turned over to them."

Accidents happen. During 1998's "La Traviata," the small bulb lights that outline the balcony and gallery went on. It happened as Violetta was opening the window, he said. "The stage got brighter and all the little bulbs came up to 50 percent very slowly. The whole hall got this very elegant glow and then it faded away. That made it into a review as a concept."

Richard Strauss' "Elektra" will be sung in German with English supertitles at 8 p.m. Wednesday and Saturday at Music Hall. Tickets are \$14-\$110 at the Music Hall box office, or call (513) 241-2742.

Publication Date: 07-16-2002