

Ubu article from Saarbrücken German Performance 1994

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Rubber gloves down there: Ke-Qing Liu takes on the lead role in Andrew Toovey's chamber opera *Ubu*. The Saarland State Theatre production can be seen again at the Old Fire Station in Saarbrücken on Sunday.

A bit of anarchy - just for fun

Tomorrow sees a further performance of Andrew Toovey's opera *Ubu* in Saarbrücken. We spoke to the composer.

By our correspondent
JÜRGEN HAMMEL

The first performance of *Ubu* by Andrew Toovey, based on a text by Jarry, took place on 2 March at Saarbrücken's Old Fire Station. It was produced by Philipp Himmelmann and directed by Susanne Maier, with costumes designed by Angela C. Schuett. The result was quirky and strident. The composer attended the performance, so we caught up with him.

His views on composing, opera and staging bubble up as if from nowhere. He is direct and spontaneous, occasionally interrupting himself with a coarse, infectious laugh. Then he gets going again with stories about his collecting mania: Swatches or African flags. This 33 year old certainly doesn't come across like a "typical" composer- he's not sensitive, precise or overwhelmingly intellectual... Yet this makes it all the easier to see him as the composer of *Ubu*.

The feisty language used in the libretto, which he helped to write, repeats itself to some extent when he talks. He wants his music to be powerful, he says, and it can be very loud, so he was excited by the strong characters in Jarry's text. He was most intrigued by Pa Ubu himself: "A disgusting character, like Hitler, a complete arsehole." He explains convincingly how he breathes musical life into stereotypes. He imitates different styles- Bach, Mozart, Verdi, Wagner, Schönberg, or Minimalism. "I treat those models the same way Pa Ubu treats his people- I throw them around, I bash them up."

So is Toovey partial to anarchy and destruction himself? He says he is, but quickly qualifies this by adding that certain classical composers are still treated like gods or saints in our culture. "I'm not saying for one moment that I hate Mozart or Wagner- on the contrary, I like them. But that doesn't stop me from chucking a bit of shit at them – just for fun".

The enjoyment of writing music.

In the same way he prefers not to take himself too seriously. It's certainly important for a composer to do the best he can, he says- even when composing something primitive, it's important to know how it's done in order to make it work. But the most important thing is to enjoy composing and not to get too caught up with one technique or another. The music in *Ubu* does owe a great deal to various musical techniques, though. This work marked Toovey's first use of parody, and he learned a great deal about his craft while writing it. However it also saw him grappling with some questions: "Where am I? Do I want my music to be serial, or minimalist, or neoromantic?" The answer turned out to be "None of the above." That's why Toovey's recent works have been very diverse. "I can write a soft, slow piece followed by one which is a good deal more violent than anything in *Ubu*", he jokes. "It just depends what mood I'm in- I just need to have fun writing it".

Toovey reaches the same conclusion when he looks back on his studies. Before he went to Morton Feldman in 1987, he attached a great deal of importance to pitches and other musical parameters. He wrote complex, finely honed miniatures. Feldman, known for his pieces which lasted two hours, gave him confidence by advising him to let rip and write. Michael Finnissy, with whom he studied next, took a different line: he made Toovey dissect his own work, review every detail and adopt a self-critical approach. Perplexed, he turned to Harrison Birtwistle. "He told me: Just do what you want. So, because he is one of our best composers, I thought: I'll do just that".