

## The enigma of *La ville morte* at the Greek National Opera

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On January 24, we attended the third out of the five performances of *La ville morte*, a barely known opera by **Nadia Boulanger** and **Raoul Pugno**, on the **GNO Alternative Stage**.

The piece was the result of a joint effort between the subsequently leading music educator and orchestra conductor and her mentor, acclaimed pianist, composer and conductor, with whom she was allegedly romantically involved. Although not particularly common, collaborations among composers were not an unprecedented phenomenon in the French stage culture of the time. In this case, the libretto was based on Italian poet **Gabriele d'Annunzio's** decadent play of the same title that explores the forbidden romances of four archaeologists against the backdrop of the Mycenae excavation.

The five-act opera was almost completed and was planned to be presented at the Opéra Comique in Paris in 1914, the year that was marked both by Pugno's sudden death during his tour in Russia and the outbreak of the First World War. These events led to the **eventual abandonment of the piece, of which only the spartito (i.e. the complete vocal score with piano accompaniment) has survived.**

Boulanger gradually gave up composing – perhaps due to the flagrantly sexist culture prevailing at the time –, leaving only a few works behind (mainly vocal pieces/songs). Her decision was finalized after the premature loss of her sister Lili, one of the greatest talents of her generation.

*La ville morte* was first performed on stage with a new orchestration almost a century later, in 2005 in Sienna, Italy. It was then presented *concertante* in Gothenburg, Sweden, in 2020.

On the occasion of its initial staging, American pianist and conductor **Neal Goren**, founder and artistic director of the Gotham Chamber Opera at the time (a touring company that had brought rarely performed chamber operas to the New York stage since 2000), was impressed by the work, but disappointed both by its orchestration and stage production. Therefore, he turned to the “Nadia Boulanger Foundation” and David Conte, one of Boulanger's last surviving protégés, who supervised the new orchestration that was commissioned by the company from American composers Joseph Stillwell & Stefan Cwik.

Gotham Chamber Opera's efforts were continued from 2019 onwards by Catapult Opera, which was planning to present *La ville morte* in 2020. This plan was however eventually thwarted by the coronavirus pandemic. The circumstances, the contacts with the Greek National Opera, and Giorgos Koumendakis' favourable stance finally led to the **world**

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**première of this opera's new orchestration on the GNO Alternative Stage** on January 19, with subsequent performances being scheduled for April in New York.

Through **Andromache Chalfant's** setting, which evoked different "topoi" and was suggestively lit by **Jessica Ann Drayton**, American director **Robin Guarino's** precise staging allowed for the clear development of the static "action" centered around blind Anne, **giving emphasis on the portrayal of the special psychosynthesis and innermost feelings of the characters towards the young, pure Héb  **: the incestuous feelings of her brother Lysandre, Anne's covert homosexual desires, and the latter's husband Alexandre's sexual attraction! The male costumes –with an "Indiana Jones" flair for those of men– were designed by **Candice Donnelly**.

Inescapably, the focus was placed more on the music part. Although the opera's style is typical of French late Romantic music (tonal, strongly chromatic and with modal shades), Debussy' influence– justified not only from the connection of the libretto to *Pell  as et M  lisande* – is strong (same as in the vocal writing). No one can say with certainty which of the two composers wrote each part of the opera, except for the beautiful introductory Prelude that was penned by Boulanger.

From a technical aspect, the new orchestration employed Wagnerian *Leitmotive* but respected, for the most part, the aesthetic of a Debussy-esque impressionism, enriched with scattered references from Faur   (teacher of Boulanger) to... Berg! **Conductor Neal Goren brought it to life with precision and sensitivity, leading a well-balanced eleven-member instrumental ensemble (5 strings – 5 winds – piano), with a carefully cared-for soloist accompaniment.** The only objection was about the orchestra's proximity to the soloists, which often resulted in overshadowing their voices.

The four-member all-American cast consisting of soprano **Melissa Harvey** (H  b  ), the visually impaired (!) mezzo-soprano **Laurie Rubin** (Anne), tenor **Joshua Dennis** (L  onard) and baritone **Jorell Williams** (Alexandre) portrayed very well the roles from a theatrical perspective, whereas the clear delivery of the sung French text allowed for an effective – albeit not fully intelligible– *parlando* of the vocal writing. Talented Harvey delivered an excellent performance of the aria in Act III.

**Henceforth, some questions still stand: to what extent does this orchestration serve as the final statement of this piece, or how would it sound if it was performed by a purely francophone cast?** In any case, even if someone was left under the impression that *La ville morte* did not reveal all its enigmas, hosting this totally honest (even as an exercise of "music archaeology") and important for the international operatic scene production has been a great honour for the GNO.