Fri 7

Friday 7 June | 7.30pm | Snape Maltings Concert Hall

Blond Eckbert

Simon Wallfisch Blond Eckbert
Flora McIntosh Berthe, his wife
William Morgan Walther, his friend / Hugo, his friend / An old woman
Aoife Miskelly A bird

Gerry Cornelius conductor
Alexander Robinson assistant conductor

Robin Norton-Hale director
Eleanor Bull designer
Jamie Platt lighting designer
Monica Nicolaides assistant dir

Pre-performance talk Friday 6.30pm, Peter Pears Recital Room: Judith Weir, Robin Norton-Hale and Gerry Cornelius *30'*

Judith Weir (b.1954)
Blond Eckbert (1993; rev. 2006 'pocket version')

Libretto by **Judith Weir, after Ludwig Tieck** (1773–1853)

performed by arrangement with Wise Music Group

Act I
Flying Prelude
Scene 1: Eckbert and Berthe at Home
Scene 2: Walther has arrived
Scene 3: Berthe's Ballad
Scene 4: Strohmian!

Act II
Prelude: Walther's Death
Scene 1: Berthe's Last Words
Scene 2: Accusation
Scene 3: Eckbert, fugitive
Scene 4: At the End

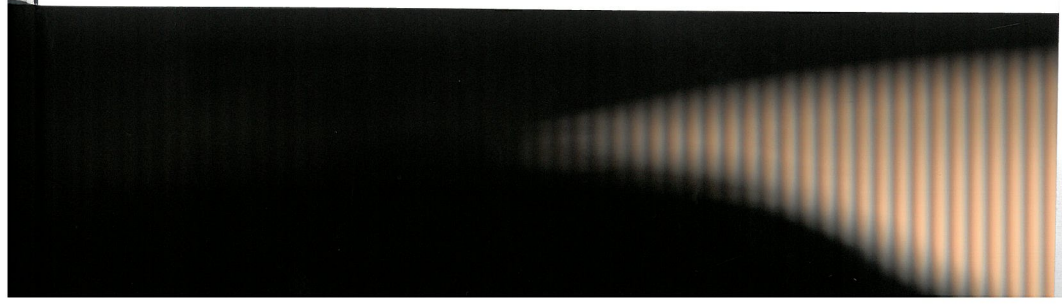
There is no interval
Duration: approx 70'
This event is surtitled

James Longford repetiteur
Paul McKenzie additional coach

Ryan Watson head of productic
Amy Batty company manager o
Sophie Meikle stage manager
Piran Jeffcock production carp
Joe Kirk, Joe Crossley product
Jack Ryan lighting programmer
Arabella Effy Wing costume su
Emily Cracknell assistant costu
Grace Dwyer-Cummins props

Produced by English

Kindly supported
in memory



Blond Eckbert

Judith Weir is one of Britain's leading contemporary composers. President of the Royal Society of Musicians and outgoing Master of the King's Music, she has composed extensively across all genres, but she is known especially for her operas for stage and television. Through the 1980s, Weir developed a highly distinctive personal style that combines clarity and economy of expression with relative tonal consonance, wry theatricality, a capacity to disconcert, rhythmic dexterity informed by a close study of Scottish, Balkan and other folk music, ironic references to Classical, Romantic, medieval and other more distant historical periods and geographical styles, and a particular interest in narrative and storytelling, especially in folktales and ancient sagas.

For the subject of her third major opera, premiered by English National Opera in 1994, Weir turned to Ludwig Tieck's *Novelle*, *Der blonde Eckbert* (1797), a cryptic Kunstmärchen or literary fairy tale on which she based her own libretto following extensive research. This choice is entirely fitting with her concern for economy of expression and a certain objective distance from overly emotive subjects. But why the attraction to early German Romanticism? Folklore collections by Johann Gottfried Herder and the Brothers Grimm, among others, contributed directly to the birth of Romanticism, and they included many topics of which Weir is fond: nature; the supernatural; fate; community; ritual; story-telling; wit. She is also drawn to Schubert, who was among the earliest to respond musically to some of these tropes.

The daughter of a Jungian-trained psychologist, Weir has remarked that 'Tieck searches for the truths of the psyche before psychology was invented'. Tieck's story revolves around an isolated couple, the knight Eckbert and his wife Berthe. Living in a secluded castle they have few acquaintances, the exception being Eckbert's friend Walther. One stormy

Fri 7

evening, huddled around a roaring fire – the hearth symbolising the secure reality of the home in contrast to the unstable world of the fairytale – Eckbert decides to encourage his wife to tell the strange story of her childhood. Weir presents this narrative in Act I, scene 3, as a declamatory-style aria ('Berthe's Ballad'), which forms a kind of opera within an opera. Berthe explains that she grew up in poverty, ran away from home and discovered, in mysterious woods, an old woman, a dog, and a bird that lays precious jewels. These took Berthe into their care. Eventually, when she grew too curious about the world outside, Berthe ran away once again, stealing the magic bird and its jewels.

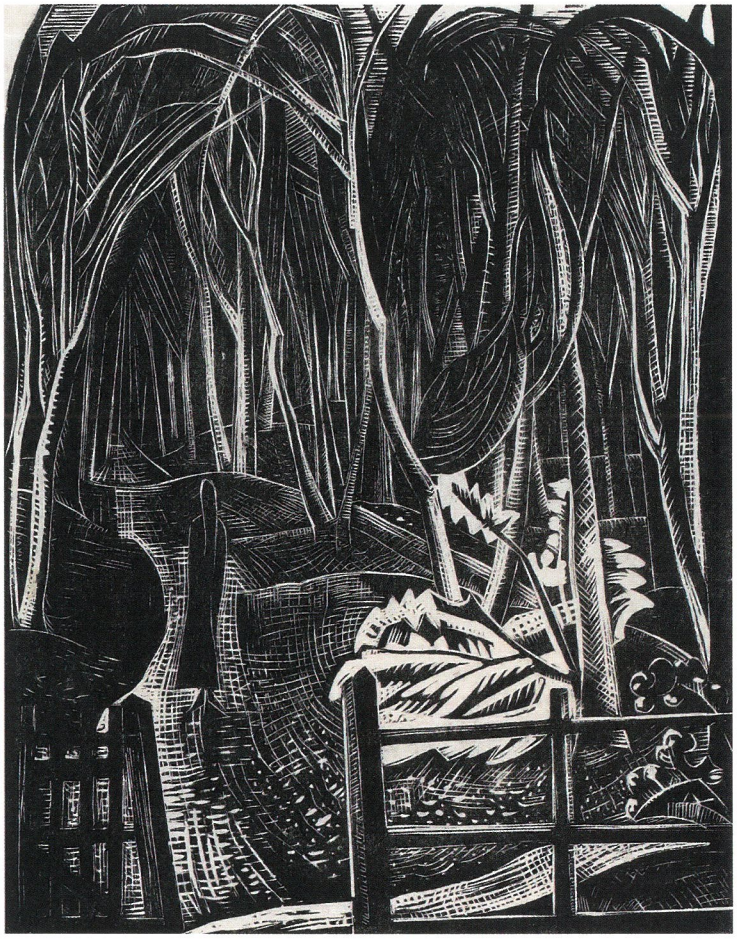
In Weir's version of the *Novelle*, the bird is the narrator, sung by a soprano who is on stage throughout the opera; in Tieck's original, the bird is killed by Berthe, shortly after she runs away. With this change, Weir highlights her fascination for fateful, speaking birds in myths and folktales – a symbol of nature's wisdom – and she frames the action with a female voice: the opera begins with the bird's soaring motif in the so-called 'Flying Prelude', followed by her introductory narration, and she sings at the end, over the sounds of an agonised, dying Eckbert, who no longer knows what is real and what imagined. The bird also provides a refrain through its song of woodland solitude ('Waldeinsamkeit' – a sense of oneness with nature, of being alone but not lonely), which hints at Weir's own belief in the importance of being in harmony with nature.

This evening's performance uses a modified, so-called 'pocket version' of the original score, which Weir prepared for The Opera Group in 2006. The full orchestration of the original has been reduced to just ten players: oboe, two clarinets (one doubling bass clarinet), two horns, harp, two violins and two cellos. Various cuts have also been made throughout the piece, but with no change to the storyline. These revisions help to illuminate the sung text and highlight Weir's fragmentary style – the music's frequent shifts of mood, pulse and dynamics – which is consistent with the fragmentation of experience in the *Novelle* genre. There is also an increased role for the harp, both to bolster the harmony and to gild the story's supernatural content.

The pared-back scoring heightens the nervous, jittery quality of the first scene, when a storm rages outside Eckbert and Berthe's castle, and their friend Walther approaches through the gloom. Scattered throughout this scene, and the opera as a whole, are subtle allusions to the sounds in Berthe's story – the whistling birch trees, barking dog and singing bird; snap pizzicatos after Eckbert's line 'How sullen the sky', for example, may evoke the dog. There is a strong sense that Walther is a *Doppelgänger*, Eckbert finding in him a way of thinking that is 'the same as his own'. Eckbert desperately wants to share his secrets but is nervous about doing so, and the music mirrors this anxiety with a rapid, repeated note, or 'hammerstroke', figure in the strings, when Walther arrives. This idea comes from Weir's orchestral piece *Heroic Strokes of the Bow* (1992), composed before the opera, which alludes in various ways to Beethoven's *Eroica* symphony (1803–4), a close contemporary of Tieck's story.

Eckbert, however, stands in anti-heroic contrast to the Beethovenian model of the striving Romantic hero: Eckbert's inner doubts turn Beethoven's heroic ideal upside down. But there is a fiendish dissonance in the Beethoven – a C sharp in the opening E flat major melody – which has a role to play in Weir's opera: it is heard when Walther names the dog – 'Strohmian' – which Berthe had forgotten, making her realise that Walther knows her story. It is also the very last note we hear, when Eckbert lies dying on the ground.

Walther's unexplained revelation – that he knows the dog's name – represents a 'Wendepunkt', a *peripeteia* or turning point. In Tieck's story this moment is undemonstrative, its true force only coming through towards the end when Berthe recalls it shortly before



Paul Nash (1889–1946): Winter Wood
1922, woodcut, H15cm x W11cm

dying. Weir, however, takes this opportunity to set the couple's paranoia in full motion, and from here on it is all downhill – or rather, all backwards, towards Eckbert's and Berthe's origins. Another change Weir makes occurs in scene two, where she invents extensive text for Walther, not present in the Tieck. This provides a vehicle for some rich, Schummanesque horn writing, as Walther vividly describes the wild mountain landscape he has travelled through.

The opening of Act II recalls the start, being set on 'a raw stormy winter day', highlighting the German Romantics' concept of nature as a reflection of people's states of mind. Eckbert, out hunting, sees Walther and shoots him. But his paranoia only increases. In Act II, scene two – a bustling urban setting – Eckbert confides in Hugo, who subsequently resembles Walther and appears to consort with Eckbert's enemies. Here Weir introduces an offstage chorus that accuses Eckbert of murder, and the bird, too, sings of Walther's death. Eckbert sets out in search of Berthe's mysterious childhood home and eventually encounters the Old Woman, who reveals that she was Walther and Hugo, and that Berthe was in fact his sister, who 'was not your mother's child'.

Fri
7

The unholy alliance of Berthe and Eckbert, which transgresses a normative cultural law, mirrors a generic violation in Tieck's *Novelle* between realistic narrative, or myth, and the supernatural fairy tale. As Maria Tata has observed, Eckbert 'has long been harbouring premonitions of incest' – as he sings, 'why have I always imagined this dreadful thing?' Eckbert's request to his wife to tell her story might therefore be interpreted as a projection of his sense of insecurity onto Berthe – her story acts as a foil to his nagging suspicion that he is married to his own sister, and that his father was adulterous. Despite his efforts to run away from such doubts, the opera moves inexorably towards their confirmation, in true Oedipal fashion.

David Beard © 2024

David Beard's forthcoming book 'The Music of Judith Weir' will be published by Cambridge University Press as part of its 'Music since 1900' series of monographs.

See also:
'Myths, Folktales and Music' by Carolyne Larrington, p.214