

## We Interpreted Don Juan as Our Contemporary

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(dramaturge)

- Schulhoff's opera *Flammen (Flames)* is not performed often. The staging by the Pfalztheater Kaiserslautern from the year 2008 is only the fourth and, up until now, last stage production. How did you come across this title? Was the staging a part of a wider dramaturgical plan or conception?

For the 2006/07 season, the Pfalztheater Kaiserslautern appointed Uwe Sandner as its new musical director. His ambition for the repertoire of the musical theatre was to place a strong emphasis on modern works, including contemporary musical theatre productions—something which in previous years had only occasionally figured in the program. In the discussions that took place about the program at that time between Uwe Sandner, theatre manager Johannes Reitmeier, opera director Urs Häberli, and myself as musical dramaturge, we looked for a starting point from which to establish modern works in the program and to introduce them to our public. It seemed to us that the right way to do this would be to first stage works from the classical modern period (in other words, from the 1920s) before venturing to take the step directly to contemporary works.

When we looked more closely at the archive of former programs at the Pfalztheater, we were surprised to find that a large number of quite well-known works from the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century had never been performed, and that successful composers such as Ernst Krenek, Franz Schreker, Alexander Zemlinsky, and Erich Wolfgang Korngold had practically never or only marginally figured in Kaiserslautern. We wanted to change this.

This made us think of the reconstruction of the exhibition “Entartete Musik” (“Degenerate Music”)—originally assembled by the Nazis in 1938—which was put on by Albrecht Dümling and Peter Girth in Düsseldorf as well as various other places in 1988. It came home to us in a shocking way that the consequences of the Nazi doctrine aimed against Jewish composers as well as other forms of new music and jazz could still be observed. Lines of musical development were violently interrupted in 1933, which were not taken up again after 1945. On behalf of the Pfalztheater Kaiserslautern, we wanted to rectify this in some way and to fill the gaps we had discovered in our repertoire. Now, in the early 2000s, we wanted our public to have the chance to get to know this tremendous musical richness that had been lost. So we created,

under the title “Aufbruch in die Moderne” (“Opening up to Modern Music”), a series of performances to be staged over a number of years, with operatic works that had been branded by the National Socialists as “degenerate music” or whose composers had been condemned and persecuted, or even killed. The works that were staged highlighted quite different aspects of “degenerate music”: some had been composed before the Nazis seized power and were then condemned (for example, *Jonny spielt auf* [*Jonny Strikes Up*] by Ernst Krenek), others originated in exile and remained fragmentary (*Der König Kandaules* [*King Kandaules*] by Alexander Zemlinsky), others were written in what was called “internal emigration” (*Verkündigung* [*Annunciation*] by Walter Braunfels), and others again were created after some distance in time after flight and persecution (*Portret* [*The Portrait*] by Mieczysław Weinberg).

We wanted to place a strong emphasis on the launch of the series “Opening up to Modern Music”, and so in the 2007/08 season, we included two pieces in the program straight away: after *Jonny spielt auf* in February 2008, Erwin Schulhoff’s *Flammen* had its premiere on 19 April 2008. Our musical director Uwe Sandner had mainly been aware of Erwin Schulhoff’s piano pieces, but through the CD recording conducted by John Mauceri and released by Decca in the “Degenerate Music” series in 1993/94, we were quickly able to form a picture of the opera *Flammen*—and we were all enthusiastic about this composition and definitely wanted to produce the opera in the Pfalztheater. Our series *Opening up to Modern Music* consisted of the following operatic works: Ernst Krenek: *Jonny spielt auf* (2008), Erwin Schulhoff: *Flammen* (2008), Alexander Zemlinsky: *Der König Kandaules* (2009), Erich Wolfgang Korngold: *Das Wunder der Heliane* (*The Miracle of Heliane*, 2010), Mieczysław Weinberg: *Portret* (2010), and Walter Braunfels: *Verkündigung* (2012). They were followed slightly later by Franz Schreker: *Irrelohe* (2015), Alexander Zemlinsky: *Der Zwerg* (*The Dwarf*, 2015), and Viktor Ullmann: *Der Kaiser von Atlantis* (*The Emperor of Atlantis*, 2019). Our musical director Uwe Sandner was responsible for the artistic direction of all these operatic productions in this series, and so we can be fully justified in saying that this question was an important personal matter for him during the time he spent in his post at the Pfalztheater (2006 to 2020).

- In your view as a dramaturge, why is Schulhoff’s opera—despite that almost one hundred years have passed since it was written—still viewed as a kind of operatic exclusivity?

In my view, there are a number of factors that have so far prevented a wider reception of Schulhoff’s *Flammen*. Firstly, there is the unusual dramaturgical structure, with many extended instrumental passages and a rather episodic plot; you could almost speak about a kaleidoscopic medley of images relating to the Don Juan myth. This is quite a long way from a classical opera dramaturgy with a continuous logical plot and tangible characters; Schulhoff was already confronted with these objections when the opera was written, for example from his publishers. But of course this aspect can also be seen as a positive quality, as consciously modern—an open narrative structure offering a production team plenty of material for making its own creative version when staging it in the theatre.

Secondly, I am convinced that the interruption of this work by the National Socialists has had significant consequences that were not overcome with the end of the Second World War in 1945. It is clear that in the newly blossoming cultural life

after 1945 not all the threads that had been severed in 1933 were picked up again. For the moment what was new, challenging, irritating, and perhaps unruly had no chance, particularly in the field of musical theatre and opera; it was primarily the nice, entertaining, and affirmative aspects that were in demand. Although the premiere of *Flammen* in Brno in January 1932 is supposed to have been quite successful, the opera did not have the chance of a second and third production that would have established this work permanently in repertoires. After 1945, people had the impression that the premiere had taken place a long time ago, especially as Schulhoff had died tragically in the Wülzburg concentration camp in 1942 and so could no longer promote his work himself.

A third factor is undoubtedly the fact that *Flammen* is a quite an expensive work to stage. The singing roles, in particular of course that of Don Juan, but also of the female characters and La Morte, are extremely challenging and difficult to fill, and a large orchestra is also required, with a number of special instruments: an organ and a jazz band to provide incidental music. Looking back on it today, I am a little surprised that we managed all this at the Pfalztheater in 2008.

- **The presence of serious eternal themes, and on the other hand sarcasm and grotesquerie, with explosive eroticism or even obscenity in certain scenes, and finally even the cinematic structure of the opera, with the surprising visual aspect of the scenes and music, jazz—all of this makes it interesting for contemporary treatments. What interpretation did your creative team choose? Which moments did you view as important to emphasize?**

To start with, we in the production team—musical direction: Uwe Sandner; production: Urs Häberli; stage design: Thomas Dörfler; costumes: Ursula Beutler—found it fascinating dealing with an opera on the Don Juan theme from a modern perspective. The way Don Juan is viewed in *Flammen* is quite clearly based on psychoanalysis: the opera is not concerned so much with an individual story as with the archetypes of male and female. The image of the resplendent seducer, which Mozart's opera can perhaps convey—although even there it is not without flaws—is essentially emphatically deconstructed in *Flammen*. Instead of taking pleasure in seduction, Don Juan falls prey to ennui, emptiness, and self-loathing. His longing for redemption is linked conceptually to Wagner's world of ideas, in particular of course to *Parsifal*, which is also concerned with the sublimation of the sex drive and overcoming the erotic urge. In other aspects, conceptual parallels can be found to *Der fliegende Holländer* (*The Flying Dutchman*) or *Tannhäuser*—redemption through the faithfulness of a woman—or also to *Tristan und Isolde*; Schulhoff even quotes the “Tristan chord”.

In the performance in Kaiserslautern, Don Juan was understood and interpreted as somebody from our time, although without any attempt at specific references to the present day in the set and costumes. The impossibility of a genuine, fulfilling, equal relationship between man and woman could perhaps be seen as the main theme of the production.

- **How did you deal with the prevailing static character of the plot and the length of the pure instrumental parts in this opera?**

The production team under Urs Häberli regarded the collage-like form of narration of *Flammen* as a positive quality of the opera, rather than a weakness. So in their

staging of the work, the extensive instrumental *intermezzi* offered plenty of space for using various theatrical means in order to look into the soul of Don Juan, or to examine his relationships to the various female figures, whereby the relationship to La Morte perhaps truly represents the most profound and intimate one.

An attempt was made to create images going beyond realism, which emphasized the nightmare elements in the individual scenes or aimed at an abstract exaggeration of the action. Perhaps we had been inspired by the image worlds of Surrealist painting—for example, in the work of René Magritte—and we wanted to transfer them to the stage. Thus, the choir of six female shadows always moved around on high stilts, in one scene accompanied by supernumeraries on bungee ropes, whom Don Juan then met on a kind of inflatable sofa. A further example might be the enormous thurible which swung across the stage during the “midnight mass” at the moment when the scene shifted into an orgiastic dance. In addition to such stage effects, in several scenes dance (choreography: Stefano Giannetti) was used as a physical expression of eroticism, and the medium of video was also used. A film by the Swiss video artist Chantal Michel showed impressive images of someone imprisoned within themselves, which fit in well with the action of the opera. And for the first time in the Pfalztheater, a live camera was used in order to exaggerate the scene through doubling and enlarging images.

I do not think that we in the team complained about the static character of the plot when we were preparing the production concept. On the contrary, we regarded the material provided by the score and libretto as an opportunity for an unfettered piece of theatre on the Don Juan theme.

- The opera came about over a fairly long period of time and when it was first performed in Brno in 1932, by which time Schulhoff’s avant-garde period was already over. Schulhoff emphasized in his introductory speech to the Brno audience that he did not want to create a superficial sensation. He literally spoke of the fact that “the collective only obtains morality when the individual is able to find, under many bad qualities, also those good ones—among other things even his own Self”.<sup>1</sup> Did you notice, along with your colleagues, even those hidden aspects, one might say the social-critical appeal and dimension of Schulhoff’s opera?

I am not sure whether we had this speech by Erwin Schulhoff available when we were working on the production. Although Urs Häberli made use of all conceivable means of theatrical expression in putting on the work, he is above all a producer who works with psychology. He and his team were certainly not concerned with a sensational spectacle as an end in itself, but with analyzing the phenomenon of “Don Juan”—the suffering of an almost compulsive sex drive; the inability to form a genuine relationship, to have a genuine meeting with a woman; the inability to experience genuine love. Our Don Juan was not interpreted as a historical or literary phenomenon, but as our contemporary. Seen in this way, you could conclude

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<sup>1</sup> Prague, National Museum—Czech Museum of Music (Národní muzeum – České muzeum hudby), collection “Erwin Schulhoff”, call number S 173/311: “Die Moral findet sich erst dann im Kollektivum, wenn der einzelne fähig ist, unter vielen schlechten Eigenschaften auch gute zu finden, darunter auch sein eigenes Ich.”

that the quintessence of the performance was a disillusioned picture of a society in which a happy, fulfilling encounter between woman and man hardly seems possible. The consequences for the character of society as a whole, which only goes around in circles in the pursuit of its own pleasure, but is not shaped by any other values, were displayed in an atmosphere of emptiness, darkness, and cold, without the production trying to make this a specific portent of, for example, the catastrophe of the Second World War or the Holocaust. Here the production stayed intrinsically with the theme of the plot. In any case, this performance based on the Don Juan myth offered enough images and questions to provoke an examination of today's relationship structures.

*Interview conducted by **Helena Spurná**  
From the German translated by Peter Michael Stephens*

▼ **Erwin Schulhoff, *Flammen***

**Pfalztheater Kaiserslautern—Big House (Großes Haus), Kaiserslautern**

**Premiere:** 19 April 2008

**Conductor:** Uwe Sandner

**Director:** Urs Häberli

**Stage designer:** Thomas Dörfler



Fig. \*41. Don Juan (Douglas Nasrawi) and Woman (Silvia Hablowetz)



Fig. \*42. Don Juan (Douglas Nasrawi) with the Shadows



Fig. \*43. Margarethe (Adelheid Fink) and Don Juan (Douglas Nasrawi)