

**Questions for Thaddeus Strassberger, director of the
SummerScape 2010 production of *The Distant Sound***

Bard SummerScape 2010 presents Franz Schreker's opera *The Distant Sound* (*Der ferne Klang*), in the Sosnoff Theater at the Richard B. Fisher Center for the Performing Arts, July 30 – August 6. *The Distant Sound* tells the tragic story of Fritz, a composer who forsakes Greta, his beloved, for the sound that is a distant echo of her presence.



Thaddeus Strassberger, winner of the 2005 European Opera Directing Prize, directed the acclaimed 2009 SummerScape production of Meyerbeer's *Les Huguenots*. His most recent productions include Ambroise Thomas's *Hamlet*, conducted by Plácido Domingo, at Washington National Opera. His upcoming new productions include *Fidelio* at Opera Boston and *The Rape of Lucretia* with Norwegian National Opera. Last week, during a rehearsal break, Strassberger answered a few questions about the SummerScape 2010 production of *The Distant Sound*.

Q. There are many ways for a director to begin preparing an opera—through the libretto and music, certainly, but also real locations, information about the composer's source material, relevant biographical details, and so forth. When you start thinking about a brand-new production like this one, where do you begin?

A. Classic repertory operas are often a greater challenge than brand-new productions. When a piece is well known, you can spend a lot of energy filtering out what you already know about it, looking for some uncharted territory to explore. With a production of an opera such as *The Distant Sound*—which, as this is the U.S. stage premiere, will be completely new to most of our audience—I have the opposite problem. There's so much information to convey not only about the plot proper, but also about the characters themselves and the musical language they use to express their thoughts, ideas, and actions. With so many different possible directions, the process is about posing various "what if" scenarios and seeing where they lead me.

As this is my first Schreker opera, I prepared by spending as much time reading about his life and listening to his other works as I did specifically reading about and listening to recordings of the opera itself. Some significant correlations between Fritz's quest and autobiographical elements of Schreker's own experience soon emerged. It seemed I could kill two birds with one stone, and explore the journey that Fritz and Grete take as well as illuminate some of the social and artistic milieus in which Schreker created his opera.

Q. In what time period is the opera set?

A. At the beginning of the opera we are in 1919, just as World War I is ending in Western Europe. The plot is structured to take place over about 15 years. I decided to set the finale in 1934, the year Schreker died.

Q. How does the time period influence the look of the production?

The time period opened up a whole world of visual references for us to use, including the emerging language of film. Celluloid, plastics, and film-developing technologies were beginning to forever alter the world these characters inhabit. The very first image that you'll see, in our production, is a huge photograph of a forest scene. Right away, we see a natural world that is filtered through man-made machines. The mystery of the mythical forest is captured, distilled, and almost tamed. As we move through the first act, common household objects collaged in unexpected ways let us know that any vestiges of 19th-century romanticism have been consigned to history's dustbin.

Widespread war, industrialized and on a scale like never before, brought about scathing depictions by artists such as George Grosz and Otto Dix and the filmmaker Fritz Lang, all of whom had firsthand knowledge of the battlefield. We reference these artists not only in the look of the sets and costumes, but also in their depiction of human interactions that they convey in their commentary on the absurdity of their times.

The Act II scene that takes place at a Venetian "cabaret"—which is also a bordello—logically lands us in the late 1920s. It was the height of the era's uncertainty: governments and militaries were reorganizing, creating an atmosphere of unpredictability that manifested itself in a chaotic hedonism. In our staging of Act II the rear of the stage is a huge mirror, and the stage is covered with mirrors that reflect the bordello workers and their clientele. The shifting sparkle of mirrors dazzles as well as confuses, creating a sense of wealth and possibility that you somehow know, in your gut, is nothing more than a distorted reflection of an ugly reality. No matter how hard we wish to evade them, glimpses of the hardship underneath emerge through the cracks.

In Act III, as Fritz's world collapses around him, it also begins to fade into something more sinister and isolating. The clarity of the previous pictures begins a slow entropic dissolution into oblivion. Fritz may not survive to the end of the opera, but I really hope that Franz Schreker regains his rightful place in the repertory, and that there will be more productions that plumb the depths of this heartbreaking opera.