

**OPPOSITE TOP** Peter Klatzow (music), Michael Williams (libretto), *Words from a Broken String*, 2010, Lucy Lloyd (Filipa van Eck) and chorus. Photo: Stuart Ralph and courtesy Cape Town Opera

**OPPOSITE BOTTOM** Bongani Ndodana-Breen (music), Mfundi Vundla (libretto), *Hani*, 2010, foreground from left: Writer (Tshepo Moagi), Imbongi (Mandisinde Mbuyazwe), Soothsayer (Nonhlanhla Yende), Chorus of Ancestors (rest of cast). Photo: Stuart Ralph and courtesy Cape Town Opera

# History Never Sounded so Good

**Michael Blake** wonders what “newness” really means in the context of South African music, and especially in relation to South African opera

In the post-World Cup period it is interesting to reflect on the build-up to “2010,” which started when South Africa won the bid in 2006, with the public assured that this was going to be the greatest thing since our democratic election; we would all benefit – economically, culturally – and it would be a great nation-building exercise. With four years of such pre-publicity, it had to be good. The reality often turned out otherwise, but we weren’t supposed to notice.

Building on that approach, Cape Town Opera (CTO) marked the centenary of the South African College of Music (SACM or “the College”) in November with *Five:20 (Operas Made in South Africa)* – an evening of five mini-operas by South African composers – in a way that I have not seen for any opera production before, certainly not a local one. The press releases rolled in for weeks: “‘Bonsai opera’ revitalises genre,” “History never sounded so good,” “Hofmeyr busts myths,” “written, composed and directed by local opera heavyweights,” “a great example of the sounds of time”;<sup>1</sup> the composers were even on YouTube, talking about their pieces. The Cape Town opera-going public, with its own set of notions about the medium (including the one that virtually anything with big voices is opera) was pre-assured that the event was going to be fantastic, and was offered the choice of not having to make a post-event critical judgement.

The marketing promoted the “in-house” nature of the event, since four of the composers have strong links to the University of Cape Town: Peter Klatzow (b. 1945), Hendrik Hofmeyr (b. 1957) and Martin Watt (b. 1970) are the College’s own composition and music theory staff, while Péter Louis van Dijk (b. 1953) is a former student. The anomaly that the fifth (and only black) composer, Bongani Ndodana-Breen (b. 1975) is an outsider to

UCT, seemed to go unnoticed. Although he currently lives in Cape Town, Ndodana-Breen has spent most of his professional career in North America. As a bonus, the audience was treated to a progenitor of the mini-opera concept, *Sublimation* by Nick Fells, presented by Scottish Opera, from whom the concept was in fact borrowed. A further marketing opportunity here: the Scottish Government must have ploughed substantial funding into sending the director, composer, conductor and cast out to Cape Town for the five performances of *Five:20*. It was Fells who (inadvertently) provided the idea of “dumbing down” that pervaded the first night along with the assurances of history in the making, by suggesting in his opening speech that mini-opera meant “audiences no longer had to commit to a three-hour marathon of one [single new] work.” UCT’s Dean of Humanities, Paula Ensor, the “commissioner” of *Five:20* capped this by telling us: her “fantasy was always to be Diaghilev” (forgetting it was ballet he commissioned). The last intervention before history moved from the future (as marketing) into the past (as art) came from CTO managing director Michael Williams, who spoke about the genesis of the project: “We decided South Africa was complex and we would look at five uniquely South African stories”;<sup>2</sup> Saartjie Baartman, Lucy Lloyd and the Bushmen, xenophobia, the assassination of Chris Hani, and Breyten Breytenbach’s prison experience.

Clearly the intention was a concerted effort at political correctness in the libretti. Oddly though, while the various opera makers (impresarios, directors, librettists, designers) advanced their claims during the build-up, the kingpins, the composers, brought to the creative process a curious mismatch between subject and music. In three of the works (Klatzow, Hofmeyr and van Dijk), the disconnect between the seriousness of subject



matter and lightweightedness of musical idiom was surprising: lightweight here meaning operatic idiom that borders on musical theatre, or that emphasises romantic lyricism, even sentimentality, and generally makes for undemanding listening. Skilled and well crafted, yes, but much of the music was not profound, and told us little we did not already know. The plots were original in terms of South Africa's operatic past, the music far less so. The Watt and Ndodana-Breen were fairly light in texture and scoring, and gentle, almost unassuming, in focus, but their music came closer to matching the gravitas of their subjects.

What linked such diverse offerings? Not, as Williams claimed, "what new music can say about our South African-ness,"<sup>3</sup> because of the mismatch, and because of the overriding absence of musical newness. It was the occasion that linked them: the College's first hundred years (5 x 20) in World Cup year. *Five:20* was mounted at what we imagine was enormous cost, with funding from *inter alia* UCT's new Gordon Institute for Performing and Creative Arts (GIPCA) funded by British philanthropist Sir Donald Gordon (who also supports the Royal Opera, Covent Garden), the National Lottery Distribution Trust Fund, and the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation. Patronage of new music on this scale is probably unprecedented in South Africa, linked to institutional power and politics, and serving the glorification of that institution. Nothing wrong with patronage for new music: it is all too rare, and unlike visual art new music is not a commodity and acquires almost no economic or cultural capital over time.

Bearing this in mind, and given the largesse of the funders, might it not have been bolder to cast around outside the Rondebosch area for new work that made more striking history? No disrespect, but these were not "opera" heavyweights: Klatzow has never composed one, van Dijk wrote a student opera, Watt workshoped excerpts from a musical about Nelson Mandela eight years ago, and Ndodana-Breen had until recently only the early *Temba and Seliba* and the chamber opera *Lives of Women: Threnody and Dances* under his belt. (Ndodana-Breen's new full-length opera on the life of Winnie Madikizela-Mandela is yet to be premiered at the State Theatre.) Hofmeyr has composed four operas but only the earliest one, *The Fall of the House of Usher*, has been staged; as performed musical dramas the others have not yet contributed to an operatic tradition.

The only living claimant to opera heavyweight in South Africa would be Roelof Temmingh, with three major operas performed and two recorded, but here he was presumably excluded by lack of affiliation with UCT. (But where does that leave Ndodana-Breen?) Before one pushes the charge of provincialism too far, however, let us consider the wider context. The local serious music composition scene revolves around academia and is thus burdened with a kind of double bind: that of the small town (in global terms) and that of the small campus. Music Departments have traditionally been conservative institutions, reactionary even – and globally too – though Klatzow was himself once far from reactionary (in the 1970s and 1980s). His decision to adopt a more audience-friendly musical voice in the 1990s is not unique: there has been a general tendency towards easy listening, also globally. For South Africa, however, this has meant, I argue, that composition has not forged a consistent new post-apartheid, postmodern musical path. What is happening in our musically dumbed-down democracy, I suggest, is that craftsman composers – who, as Susan McClary describes them, are "a priesthood of professionals" who "learn principles of musical order, [learn] to call musical events by name and even to manipulate them"<sup>4</sup> – have become the norm, often pressed into service to churn out film scores, which is the main way a composer can eke out a professional existence in South Africa.

The crux of the matter, then, is what constitutes postmodernism in art music, for we live in an era in which dumbing down is not only possible but also intellectually justifiable. Chris Walton, reviewing Peter Klatzow's *Prayers and Dances of Praise from Africa* for example, describes the "unashamedly tonal" music as "a decided turn toward postmodernism."<sup>5</sup> Ndodana-Breen refers to his own music as "influenced by the lyricism and rhythms of Africa, blended with an eclectic, postmodern approach to contemporary music."<sup>6</sup> In *Art Since 1900* Foster and his co-authors suggest that there are two branches of postmodernism in art, architecture and literature: the neoconservative and the

poststructuralist. Extending this to music, neoconservative postmodernism, a stylistic reaction to (i.e. against) modernism, "a return to ornament in architecture, to figuration in art, and to narrative in fiction,"<sup>7</sup> can be seen as a return to tonality, consonance, and rhythmic regularity in music. By contrast, poststructuralist postmodernism, which "question[s] both the originality of the artist and the authority of the tradition,"<sup>8</sup> is theoretically positioned to advance a *critique* of musical representation, musical modernism, rather than a return to it.

In *Five:20*, I suggest, we have the former kind of postmodernism at work, rather than the latter. It is not enough, as UCT Opera School Director Kamal Khan writes in the programme book, to say that "all music was new music when it was written."<sup>9</sup> This is an unnecessary apology for what CTO's marketing machine, perhaps, feared might be unacceptably "new" to local audiences. Nor can new simply be related, as here, to the personal histories of individual composers or audience members, as in "this is new for me." Khan's statement, the statement of a man passionately committed to what he is entrusted with (and who does a very fine job conducting the works) runs the risk of naïve interpretation if pushed to its logical conclusion, for even the worst music was new once.

For artists, renewal is self-evidently artistic, but as Theodor Adorno noted in 1960, in music we cling to the term "new music," year after year, generation after generation, while in the art world "new art" has almost no impact as a slogan.<sup>10</sup> This dates back to the 1920s when "new" set atonal serial composition apart from other music: "The new musical language" here, Adorno argues, "is encoded as the positive negation of the traditional one," but, he adds significantly, "it cannot be reduced to the triviality that composers simply want to do something new and different ... What is meant, rather, is that the new music constitutes a *critique* of the old" (my emphasis).<sup>11</sup>

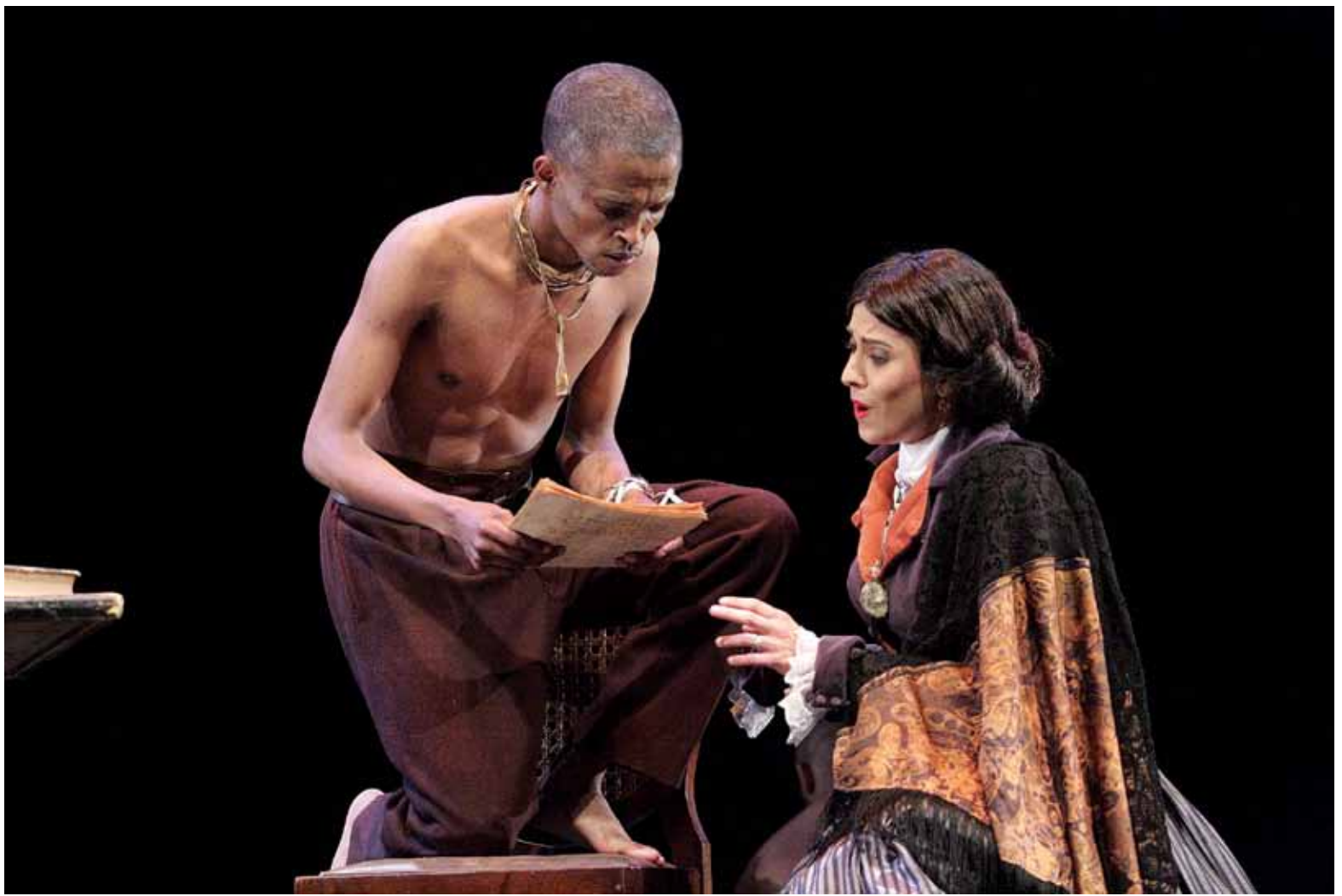
Poststructuralist postmodernism in music, by the same token, is a critique of modernism in music, either through parody – the ironic dismemberment and re juxtaposition of the old – or the application of various current global new music languages to the local stage; even including a critique of "the local" or of "South African-ness."

As critique of representation, poststructuralist postmodernism suggests a renewal of the language of new music, but a good deal of the music in *Five:20* was not "new" in this sense. What was new was the marriage of politically charged subject matter with heavy marketing and funding by a university celebrating a significant centenary.

That there is little critique in *Five:20* or in most new South African music, suggests that new music in South Africa has not yet created a critical "edge," of the kind available say in Europe for Nick Fells's *Sublimation* to square itself against. And this is where a golden opportunity was missed: for where else but in a closed, parochial, self-satisfied university context could one experience the blast of the postmodern new? Where better to make bold new musical statements about our South African-ness? It was expected in every way, not least from the marketing. We were all braced for history in the making: the demand was there, but the supply did not rise nearly enough to meet it.

*Sublimation*, the prototype for "big genre scaled down," was not quite the prototype as music, then. A fairly middle-of-the-road British idiom – stark harmony, sinewy melody, fractured vocal lines, punchy orchestration – Fells's idiom is nevertheless challenging: a seriously focused and coherent musico-dramatic language, and as such, a statement. More of a statement was made in *Five:20* by the five very different approaches to the *genre*. Watt's piece was an opera-in-mini-miniature, a tiny sequence of arias, duets and choruses each differently framed by bars and clanging doors. Hofmeyr used the extract approach: a twenty-minute scena for dramatic soprano, exploiting the solo moment that is usually part of a larger whole, and placing unprepared demands on the singer: and what a stunning performance by Siphamandla Yakupa on the first night! Van Dijk's was a mini Bernstein musical, lots of bustle between chorus and soloists, making good use of UCT Opera School's chorus. Klatzow's piece was ensemble writ small: a three-way conversation between the Constable for whom Bushmen were criminals, the Bushmen, and Lloyd's admiring attitude towards them (an attitude almost destroyed by the stage direction that had them crawling all over her desk constantly

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Peter Klatzow (music), Michael Williams (libretto), *Words from a Broken String*, 2010, //Kabbo (Thando Mpushe) and Lucy Lloyd (Filipa van Eck). Photo: Stuart Ralph and courtesy Cape Town Opera

biting the books like uneducated simpletons). Ndodana-Breen emphasised the dramatic potential of opera as vox populi, and his piece was the most complete and coherent, as a mini dramatic experience. The subjects fall into three groups, as do the composers. The two younger ones, Ndodana-Breen and Watt, grapple with identity – Xhosa and Afrikaner respectively – engaging seriously with both subject and musical material. In *Tronkvoël*, based on Breyten Breytenbach's prison poetry, Martin Watt searches for an operatic language that reflects both his African-ness – giving clarity to the libretto by Alwyn Petrus Roux – and his Afrikaner-ness; the language of this libretto was the composer's home language, Afrikaans. Likewise, Bongani Ndodana-Breen's Xhosa identity is integral to his piece. He has long incorporated aspects of African traditional music in his work, more recently alongside his other great passion, the repetitive minimalism of John Adams and Philip Glass. Klatzow and Hofmeyr opt for historical stories and period musical settings reflecting the older European operatic tradition. Klatzow's *Words from a Broken String* was even familiar from an earlier song-cycle: a stroll down memory lane, no surprises. Hofmeyr's *Saartjie* tries to divert attention away from period music with his pre-publicity claim that he is "a self-confessed myth-buster" as far as Saartjie Baartman is concerned: she exploited her situation rather than the other way round, he argues. I wished it was the music that made me uneasy rather than this view, but the combined appropriation of fairground sounds, sentimental tunes, and a Nguni lullaby does not bust any musical myths. (And the press release, "History never sounded so good," reads at its most ironic here.) Péter Louis van Dijk's *Out of Time*, a commentary on racial prejudice and xenophobia, an emotionally charged, contemporary topic, showed van Dijk more hip than his colleagues. Like most musicals, it used lots of people and stage busyness and played unashamedly to the gallery (who loved it). But xenophobia turned showbiz? – what does this say about our South African-ness?

The more politically sassed director Marcus Desando thoughtfully directed the two more thought-provoking pieces, by Watt and Ndodana-Breen. Geoffrey Hyland in the other three works submitted to the temptation to over-produce: the book-biting in *Words from a Broken String* and Vox's mercilessly half-witted kid in *Out of Time* being cases in point. Sets and lighting were adequate in all five works, with quite an elaborate two-level design for *Tronkvoël*, and changes of furniture for the rest. Inevitably the producers could not resist giving the customary stage smoke treatment to the spirits of the ancestors, who turned up in several pieces. The Cape Philharmonic under conductor Kamal Khan gave good readings of the pieces. But it was the singers, who received nothing more than a listing in the programme and hardly featured in the marketing, who impressed the most. Theirs was the real labour of making "history sound so good."

1 Cape Town Opera press releases, 1, 10, 19 November 2010.

2 Cape Town Opera press release, 19 November 2010.

3 Michael Williams, opening night speech, 19 November 2010.

4 Susan McClary, "The Blasphemy of Talking Politics During Bach Year" in *Music and Society*, eds. Richard Leppert and Susan McClary. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987, p. 16.

5 Chris Walton, "Peter Klatzow: Towards the Light" in *NewMusicSA: Bulletin of the International Society of Contemporary Music, South African Section* 5–6 (2006–7), p. 22.

6 [http://web.archive.org/web/20091024035415/geocities.com/bonganin\\_99/pageone.html](http://web.archive.org/web/20091024035415/geocities.com/bonganin_99/pageone.html), accessed 2 December 2010.

7 Hal Foster, Rosalind Krauss, Yve-Alain Bois and Benjamin H.D. Buchloh, *Art since 1900: Modernism, Antimodernism, Postmodernism*. London: Thames & Hudson, 2004, p. 596.

8 Ibid.

9 Kamal Kahn, "The Miracle of a Flourishing Opera School" in *Five:20* programme book, 2010, n.p. [15].

10 Theodor W. Adorno, *Quasi una Fantasia: Essays on Modern Music*. Trans. R. Livingstone. London and New York: Verso, 1992, p. 249.

11 Ibid., p. 260.

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