

LOST AND FOUND

KIRILL KARABITS TALKS TO JOHN ALLISON ABOUT
THOMAS DE HARTMANN'S 'ESTHER'

‘My biggest interest in him is that he’s not really present in the musical world right now—people don’t know him—and yet he’s so interesting, his orchestration technique is so fantastic. So this project feels just right to me. You might say there’s a personal connection, because as a Ukrainian based in Paris, I’m a little bit like him.’ The conductor Kirill Karabits is speaking of Thomas de Hartmann (1884-1956), the Ukrainian-born composer who lived longer in France than anywhere else. Together with the Bournemouth Symphony Orchestra and a cast led by Corinne Winters in the title role, Karabits recently recorded de Hartmann’s opera *Esther*—the composer’s largest and most ambitious work—for Pentatone, which releases it this month under the rubric ‘The Lost Opera’.

This act of recovery is one of several featuring de Hartmann in which Karabits has been involved over the last few years, but the de Hartmann revival got underway 20 years ago with the establishment of the Thomas de Hartmann Project (TdHP), very much behind this new recording. In October 2023 Karabits opened his final season as chief conductor in Bournemouth with a suite from *Le Fleurette rouge*, an early success premiered at the Maryinsky Theatre in 1907. Reviewing the Bournemouth concert, the late Andrew Clements in the *Guardian* called it ‘a spectacularly coloured score, with obvious debts to Tchaikovsky and Rimsky-Korsakov, but totally assured. It’s music that really puts an orchestra through its paces.’ Though he says he still hopes to do the full ballet, Karabits has been immersed in the meantime in what he sees as a summation of the composer’s work. *Esther* (1946), the only complete opera by a composer who wrote extensively for the stage, sets de Hartmann’s own adaptation of Racine’s 1689 play and is a three-act opera of almost two hours’ duration.

De Hartmann, who was born on his family’s estate near Khoruzhivka in the Sumy Oblast of northern Ukraine and died in Princeton, lived an exceptionally interesting life. He studied with Arensky and Taneyev and his piano teacher was Annette Essipova-Leschetizky, who also taught Prokofiev and Scriabin (and who was, as her name reflects, one of the wives of the great piano pedagogue Theodor Leschetizky). Having graduated from the St Petersburg Conservatory, de Hartmann spent several years in Munich, studying with Felix Mottl, enjoying the friendship of Rainer Maria Rilke and collaborating with Wassily Kandinsky—jointly seeking a synthesis of different artistic media. He and his wife Olga fell under the spell of the spiritual guru George Gurdjieff, with whom they travelled in the Caucasus before the entourage settled together at Fontainebleau. Even after their break with Gurdjieff the de Hartmanns remained in Paris, living there throughout the war but leaving in 1950 for America.

Some of de Hartmann’s most impressive music seems to have been composed during those Paris years, from where we hear him glancing back towards a suffering Ukraine. Such a spirit inhabits not only *Esther* but the Violin Concerto (1943) that Joshua Bell recently recorded with the INSO-Lviv Symphony Orchestra under Dalia Stasevska, also under the auspices of the TdHP and Pentatone. For his part, Karabits is far from finished with his quest: ‘I would call him a genius composer. There’s a parallel perhaps with Korngold, not least because of his film music connections and his capacity to put so many different elements into a score. But de Hartmann goes further, with this spiritual element in all his music. In *Esther* this is especially noticeable—most of all in the choruses. The opera assumes ritualistic dimensions every time the chorus is singing. Ultimately, I think that *Esther* is one of the works most representative of him—you can really hear what de Hartmann was like as a composer. It’s a dramatic work, it’s intense, it’s complex—even though the story is quite simple, which is why I also feel it’s kind of more like an oratorio than an opera.’

From Handel’s oratorio to Reynaldo Hahn’s incidental music, several composers have been drawn to the biblical story of the Persian Jewish queen who, using her position as Ahasuerus’s wife, was able to reverse an order issued by the king’s chief minister Haman to kill all the Jews of the empire. Other operatic versions include Józef Kozłowski’s *Esther* and Darius Milhaud’s *Esther de Carpentras*, in which he and his librettist (and lifelong friend) Armand Lunel reimagined the story in the context of a Provençal Purim celebration (foreshadowing the Martinů-Kazantzakis

Kirill Karabits





Thomas de Hartmann (l.) in the 1930s and (r.) with his wife Olga as a young couple in 1911

Greek Passion). *Esther de Carpentras* was premiered at the Opéra-Comique in 1938, not long before de Hartmann chanced upon an 18th-century edition of Racine in the outhouse of the home in the Paris suburb of Garches where he sought refuge during the early stages of the war.

The spiritual essence of the work has led Karabits to conclude that—much as he’s tried to interest opera houses in it—there’s perhaps not enough dramatic substance to support a full staging, so he has no immediate plans to conduct it in the theatre. On the other hand, this story of the threatened extinction of the Jews still demands attention, while threats to Ukrainian identity add another level of painful topicality. It’s little wonder that de Hartmann was so ‘emotionally touched by the story’, in the words of Karabits. ‘And by the way in which he found the Racine book—that’s what sparked him. I might be wrong, but I can’t think of any other pieces of this nature that were written under Nazi occupation and are dedicated to the memory of the Holocaust. It feels like a personal statement. For me, de Hartmann is a unique composer—for where he came from, where he lived and how he developed through his life. It’s difficult to compare him to anybody really, though naturally there’s a strong influence of 20th-century French music to be felt here.’

Completed in 1946, though with some of the orchestration not finished until 1951, *Esther* was never heard in de Hartmann’s lifetime, but he did produce a suite of four dances from Act 3 that was taken up by such distinguished conductor friends as Leopold Stokowski and Nikolai Malko. This recording has gone back to manuscript sources, something with which Karabits—given his musicological training—is very comfortable. ‘The hardest part was the proofreading, and I think I spent nearly a year on it—going back and forth with the editor of the new material and the new parts. All we had was the manuscript score and the manuscript piano score. The only orchestral parts that existed were for the dances—there were two

versions actually, one for big orchestra and one for smaller orchestra. Stokowski’s recording of the dances uses the smaller orchestra.’ In 1976, an abridged, English-language concert performance was arranged by the composer’s widow in Syracuse, NY, with Christine Flasch in the title role, and a recording was distributed privately on two LPs.

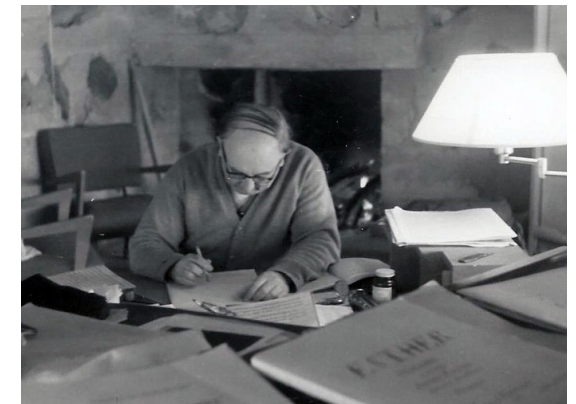
Karabits has been working closely in recent years with Elan Sicroff and Efreem Marder of the TdHP. ‘Being able to bring de Hartmann’s name—a Ukrainian name—to people’s attention is absolutely great.’ In case the name sounds slightly familiar, there was indeed apparently a family connection with the painter Viktor Hartmann of *Pictures at an Exhibition* fame—which ends of course with ‘The Great Gate of Kyiv’, immortalizing a design for a monument that was never built. ‘I was reminded of this when we did de Hartmann’s *Fairy Tales* in Bournemouth—it’s very much like a miniature version of *Pictures*, in little movements.’

Even though Karabits has stepped down after a 15-year tenure as chief conductor of the BSO, he remains conductor laureate of the orchestra and artistic director of the Voices from the East series he launched there to put the spotlight on neglected composers from eastern Europe. An early highlight of the series was Boris Lyatoshinsky’s Third Symphony, recorded for Chandos before the war in Ukraine brought more Ukrainian composers into the international spotlight. ‘Our starting point was that these works—especially as we were recording them too—had to be masterpieces. It needs to be strong music if we’re going to promote it. Lyatoshinsky’s music reminds me of my home country. It’s the sound of Ukraine.’ The conductor’s father, Ivan Karabits, was himself a composer who studied with both Lyatoshinsky and Myroslav Skoryk. ‘I feel these composers very personally. And I might add that my father was born in the Donbas—where Prokofiev was born as well.’

Fearing conscription, Karabits has not returned to his home country since the start of the war. ‘I can’t go back now because if I did they wouldn’t let me out. I think I’d prefer to be more useful being outside Ukraine. From the beginning of the conflict, I haven’t always been in complete agreement with everything they’re doing there in the cultural sphere. I don’t agree, for example, that they’ve cancelled Tchaikovsky in Ukraine. Right now the country needs the truth about its cultural legacy, and Tchaikovsky is very connected to Ukraine. But official policy is that anything even a little bit Russian is out.’

Karabits is clear in his reasoning for continuing

De Hartmann at work on the orchestration of ‘Esther’ at Frank Lloyd Wright’s home in Taliesin, Arizona, in 1950





Corinne Winters (who sings *Esther*) and Olga Bezsmertna (*Élise*) at a recording session for de Hartmann's opera in Bournemouth last September

(unlike some of his colleagues) to conduct Russian music. 'The region of Ukraine from where I come was part of the Russian Empire in the 19th century. That's a fact. So I think that if Ukraine is talking about itself as an independent country, we should take everything that belongs to us—and that includes all the music of the 19th century. The Russians say it's theirs, but actually it's also ours. And it doesn't mean we're taking it away from Russia. You can't cut culture in half the way

politicians divide people or countries. Tchaikovsky is also ours. His sister lived in Ukraine. He spent his summers there. He used Ukrainian melodies in his Second Symphony. He loved that territory and thought it had a unique identity. So why should I not consider this as part of my cultural heritage? I know it's not a simple question, but I would at least like to see it discussed.

'When I grew up, Tchaikovsky was one of those composers who drew me into music. So how can I say that because Russia invaded Ukraine, I'm cutting this out of myself, that I'm giving it away? I think it's wrong. I'm sure that if Ukrainians actually claimed Tchaikovsky, everybody would support that. Ukraine needs such victories on a cultural level as well. Beyond the facts of the war, the wider world still understands too little about Ukraine. And the country wasn't born in 1991. So Prokofiev also belongs to us—he wrote his early works in the Donbas, he loved everything that was Ukrainian. Why should I now be saying that Prokofiev is an enemy of mine? We shouldn't simply deny that Ukraine was part of this big cultural territory which we call Russia.

'It was inevitable that some of our strongest talents would be absorbed by Russia. The composers Maxim Berezovsky and Dmitry Bortniansky, for instance, they were taken from Ukraine to the court in St Petersburg. Yes, maybe the best of us was taken away, but we can't change that. So when we talk now about promoting Ukrainian music, we have to be careful not to focus on the more ordinary talents who stayed at home but also acknowledge the biggest talents who moved away. They are still our culture. They're still Ukrainians. It's wrong to say, as some are doing now in Ukraine,

'Oh, he went off to study in Russia, so we're not interested'. Of course, de Hartmann didn't go to Russia, but he also moved away—he was a true cosmopolitan—and in later life he still dedicated his music to Ukraine.'

Though Karabits, who turns 50 this year, still regards Kyiv as home, he has been based in Paris since 2002, when he took up his post as associate conductor of the Orchestre Philharmonique de Radio France. Even his early parallel life as a musicologist had an international dimension, focused as it was on the German Baroque. But it all started in Kyiv, with the discovery there of 5,000 pieces—many connected to the personal archive of C.P.E. Bach—that had gone missing from the Berlin Singakademie's archives during World War II. 'When Christoph Wolff found this archive in the centre of Kyiv, I thought—wonderful, this is my chance to make my career, a chance to find my way in conducting. The manuscripts, which had been taken to Silesia for safekeeping during the war, ended up in the hands of the Soviet army and being deposited in Kyiv, practically hidden there by the KGB.' In the aftermath of the discovery and return of the manuscripts to Berlin, Karabits went off to the Singakademie to work especially on C.P.E. Bach and Telemann, composers he still conducts when he gets the opportunity. He recorded (for CPO) the Telemann *serenata* he unearthed among the manuscripts returned to Berlin, *Pastorelle en Musique*. Another special occasion was at Cadogan Hall in 2014, the year of C.P.E. Bach's 300th anniversary, when his *St John Passion* was given its first performance in modern times. 'I was so excited to discover it—C.P.E. was and still is one of my favourite composers. There's a spontaneity in his music, an unpredictability even, that makes it hard to conduct. He was overshadowed by his father but I don't understand why he's not more popular now.'

Beyond de Hartmann's *Esther*, there are other operas by Ukrainian composers Karabits would like to do. Unsurprisingly, Lyatoshinsky's *Golden Ring* is high on the list. 'It's a very important part of our Ukrainian operatic legacy. Mykola Lysenko is of course also interesting—he's considered the first national composer of Ukraine—but for me Semen Hulak-Artemovsky would be important. He was a singer himself too.' Meanwhile, Karabits is working towards a premiere staging in Montpellier in December of Theodore Akimenko's *Le Vierge des glaciers*. Based on Hans Christian Andersen's *Snow Queen*, it has languished unperformed for over a century.

Opera has been a steady thread throughout Karabits's career, ever since he made his debut in the pit with *Pagliacci* in Kyiv in 2002. Highlights along the way have included an unforgettable Glyndebourne debut in 2008 with *Eugene Onegin*, but it now feels as if opera is taking up more of his time than ever; Karabits will spend two months in Bregenz this summer, conducting the new *La traviata* on the Lake Stage. Is he pleased at the prospect of an increasingly operatic presence? 'My teachers were always saying to me that I'm more an opera conductor than a symphonic conductor. Whatever that means!'

'Esther' is released by Pentatone on April 24.