

Music

Usher, Staatsoper Unter den Linden Berlin — a thrilling new opera built from Debussy's fragments

Annelies Van Parys has seamlessly intertwined her own music with the composer's unfinished work



Ruth Rosenfeld as Lady Madeline in 'Usher' © Martin Argyroglo

Shirley Apthorp OCTOBER 16, 2018

A waif in a nightgown, blood dripping from her mouth; a suburban house engulfed in flames; moonlight and the scratch of bare branches glimpsed through a cold window: Gothic imagery abounds in *Usher*, the Berlin Staatsoper's new world premiere.

Well, half a premiere. Debussy started an opera, with his own libretto based on Edgar Allan Poe's short story, back in 1917, but death intervened. There have been numerous completion attempts since then.

Belgian composer Annelies Van Parys goes a step further, creating a chamber opera in, with, and around Debussy's fragments. Gaea Schoeters has written a new libretto, similarly intertwined with the original. The resulting 90-minute work succeeds both for its proximity to Debussy's original and for the degree to which Van Parys has made the piece her own.

This co-operation with the vibrant Flemish Muziektheater Transparant, also co-produced with the Folkoperan Stockholm, has its first incarnation in the Berlin Staatsoper's freshly renovated small hall, the Alter Orchesterprobensaal, in a design (Philippe Quesne) which embraces the venue's architectural oddities.

It is an uncomfortably intimate space, made more so by Quesne's deliberately awkward 1980s American suburban set, the floor smothered by a giant shagpile carpet that was presumably intended to tone down a hyper-resonant acoustic. This it does, and some. So we feel unnervingly as if we are trapped in a living room with four deranged strangers who have decided to sing

opera at us. There's a touch of Hitchcock and a lot of David Lynch in the visual aesthetic. For the most part it works well, though Quesne's melodramatic character direction could do with a level of cinematic remove.

Debussy built up the character of the Doctor, making him both a Machiavellian schemer and a romantic rival for Madeline's affection. Schoeters takes him a step further, giving him additional layers of calculated fear-mongering.

These are not subtle, but read as a clear attempt to make the story chill us in a contemporary fashion. Van Parys's music does this effortlessly. Her writing is clear and colourful, her instrumentation deft, her sense of structure solid, her ability to dip in and out of Debussy's compositional language while very clearly speaking her own is formidable. She writes beautifully for voices.

Her young soloists do well. Ruth Rosenfeld is a stage animal, even if the part is written for a higher soprano, and bass David Ostrek has a remarkable voice which will only get better with time and technical work; Martin Gerke and Dominic Kraemer have just the easy assurance and evil grace their respective roles demand. And Marit Strindlund conducts with a combination of coherence, order and sensuality that matches the score perfectly.

Usher will grow stronger and tighter as it tours. If it continues as it has begun, it should become a core part of the 21st-century chamber opera repertoire.

★★★★☆

To October 30, [staatsoper-berlin.de](https://www.staatsoper-berlin.de)

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