

Either a Bend or a Line

Barbara Eckle in conversation with director Jan Schmidt-Garre about the perpendicular moment in time, ecological theatre, charged props, unyielding scenes and the mysteries of second reality

When you came to stage your first opera after directing so many films, what did you find to be the biggest difference between the two?

For me, it was the fact that I didn't get to have the final say. I still remember how strange I felt the day after the dress rehearsal. In opera, there's always a free day between the dress rehearsal and the première so that the singers can recuperate. I walked through the city and knew that, even though the opera had not been performed yet, my work was done. Even the contract had run out. It expires on the day of the dress rehearsal. I was now on the outside and could only hope that my singers would have a good première. I was still able to go into the dressing rooms, give everyone a kiss and say "break a leg"... but that was it.

Is it true that in film, your work really only begins after the shooting?

Yes, editing is the crucial phase in film. It's during editing that I'm able to compensate for a lot of things that didn't come together quite so well in the beginning. I decide what happens to the film right down to the very last second. Right down to the answer print, and even to the settings that are used at the cinema showing the première. In opera, I sit in the stalls along with the rest of the audience and allow myself to be swept up in what I see on the stage.

A lot of directors don't even go to their own premières.

...which I find absurd. I love going to them and am able to enjoy what I'm watching even when that puts me under a lot of pressure. All of a sudden a singer will add a new detail, a detail that wasn't agreed but which is good, nevertheless. I like that. And then there's this special feeling in the hall: you notice that the audience is perceiving what is on the stage as a coherent whole. That's what it was like at the première of *Arabella* in Leipzig. During the third act – an act that I'm really very happy with – all the little details we'd worked on finally came together to form a continuum. I felt a sense of collective tension in the hall that made me lean forward in my seat. It was an unbelievable feeling.

And the applause? What does it feel like?

It's ok but I feel like I'm in a trance when I'm there. I'll be hustled onto the stage by the assistant director and won't really be able to take in what's going on. I also have much less experience of this than the singers who take their bow at the end of every performance.

Does that mean that opera is a more intense experience?

We live in the here and now, in a tiny window between the past and the future, and all of our desperate attempts to use art to overcome the transience still have a sense of powerlessness about them. You can work on a film for months or years, put scene after scene together, adamant that in a hundred years' time, the piece will be received in the way that it was intended today... For me theatre which is experienced at the very moment of its creation, and which disappears again within the same

moment, is much more refined and much closer to the human condition. Ultimately it's also more stable: What is perfect in the here and now can never be taken away, as the moment is perpendicular in the flow of time. Artaud views theatre as the highest form of art for precisely this reason.

Even a conversation like the one we're having now must surely conform to this ideal. One word produces the next and disappears as soon as it's been said...

And it's the most beautiful thing in the world! I've always said that my dream would be to be an extemporising poet. But of course I'm not free from the tendency to make things material either and try to formulate my thoughts as precisely as possible – for all eternity, of course!

And as we are talking, I'm doing a pre-selection for the edited version of this interview...

That's also a legitimate approach. We can't always live in the existential present. We have a history, a future... but art enables us to experience this fulfilled moment. It's only within the fulfilled moment that art can be truly experienced.

If it's all about perfection in the here and now, then the première needn't really be such a crucial turning point. It would have to mean, then, that...

Every performance is a première! The ideal view is one that sees the première as no more than a stop within an open process where work is constantly ongoing. Perhaps this is what was once behind the concept of the "Werkstatt Bayreuth" (work in progress Bayreuth). When I was responsible for the subsequent performances as an assistant director for the first time – that was for Rudolf Noelte's production of *Danton's Death* at Salzburg Festival – I criticised every performance. At the age of 19! Actors like Will Quadflieg, Senta Berger and Heinz Baumann thought that I was mad!

I'd love to talk to you about each individual phase of staging an opera. How do you choose a piece?

I don't usually. The theatre offers me something and then I have to see if I can find a way into it. I listen to the music while looking at the piano score a few times - and to different recordings of the same score if possible – and then ask myself whether I'm able to form a picture of the opera. Not a picture of the stage scenery – more of an overall picture. A tone that interests me. Up until now, I've always found that the story seems to contradict itself at a certain point. I come up against a barrier that ultimately helps to open up the piece for me.

Can you give me an example of when that was the case?

Take Massenet's *Manon* as an example. This opera tells the story of a young woman, Manon, who falls in love at first sight with a stranger, the Chevalier Des Grieux. After starting a passionate love affair with him, she leaves him during the second of five acts. Why does she do that? She loves him, there can be no doubt about that. The music makes that abundantly clear. So as a director, my approach was to try and find an answer to that question. For me, Des Grieux isn't real. He's a character from baroque theatre, just like the lover who steps off the stage and into the real world in Woody Allen's *Purple Rose of Cairo*. Manon falls in love with this theatrical character's naivety, directness and melodramatic nature, but she knows that nothing good can come of their relationship. Reality will catch up with them at some point.

Did your Des Grieux also look like a theatrical character?

Des Grieux was a baroque character from the time of Prévost's 1731 book *Manon Lescaut*, which was the inspiration for Massenet's opera. My Manon, on the other hand, lived in Massenet's Paris at the end of the 19th century. She has a small baroque theatre in her house and one day, the little figurine of Des Grieux comes to life. Manon follows him into his theatre and we join them there during the second act. The entire stage zooms in to become a baroque theatre, complete with beautiful cardboard stage flats like the ones found at Drottningholm Palace Theatre in Sweden. The entire opera takes place between these two different time periods and levels of reality.

What role does stage scenery play as far as you are concerned?

It plays a functional role. The space must be a feature of the story. It must develop with the story. Just recently I read how the audience applauded the scenery when the curtain went up on the second act of a revival of Schenk and Rose's age-old opera, *Der Rosenkavalier*, in Munich. If I were a stage designer and that happened to me today, I would know that I had done something fundamentally wrong. Jürgen Rose himself clearly thought the same thing. For me, the space must be created by the staging. It has to live and behave like a member of the cast. If the stage scenery is to be applauded, then it should happen at the end. That's why *Arabella* started with a completely empty stage that slowly filled up as the evening progressed – I did that almost out of a sense of defiance. It's only five minutes before the end that the perfect space - the one that the opera characters have been craving – is revealed.

Do you work with video projections?

I've never had any interest in them. I've very rarely seen them done well either. Stefan Herheim is able to use projections really well. He did so in *Parsifal*, for instance, but he's also using them less and less frequently now. When I did the staging for my first opera, Peter Heilker, the opera director at the Theater St. Gallen, said to me, "You come from film. You'll definitely need a digital projector." But I want to create pure, unadulterated theatre. I like backdrops that become transparent, set changes done with the curtains open by invisible stagehands. Things like that. *Manon's* baroque scenery flats were a lot of fun, particularly because we used the most up-to-date lighting techniques to light them. I hope that I'll get a chance to use cardboard rocks in future!

Do you see props as part of the stage scenery?

I see them more as part of the mask in the Edward Gordon Craig sense, where the mask incorporates the costume and the way a specific character walks. I love keeping props on the stage and using them for different purposes during the performance so that they become charged with ever greater meaning. Props are a wonderful way of identifying a character. They can develop a life of their own and be used within the production to make reference to earlier events. I like to be a purist when it comes to stage scenery, but I don't want to do away with props altogether.

What types of props do you use?

Flowers, letters, bottles, clothing, pistols. Marietta's braid in *Die Tote Stadt*...

So do you start to work out the staging once you've identified what approach you're going to adopt?

I still try to open up the dramatic aspects of the piece in advance by breaking it up into individual units of action. This is a technique that I learned from David Esrig, and it's been enormously helpful in terms of enabling me to cut through to the core of a piece. It's a sort of structural synopsis that questions the motivations of the characters rather than the external plot. I'm able to do the staging only once I know why a character is doing what he is doing.

How detailed is this structural synopsis?

It consists of perhaps thirty sentences that I spend a lot of time refining and that give a dynamic account of the story. If these units of action make sense, then the content of the piece vaporises into them, leaving behind only the functions and the sense. This is my performance score. I look at it and can see the sequence of events in front of me.

So what you are aiming at is traditional storytelling?

Yes, even if that story isn't entirely the one the authors intended. The story doesn't matter to me as such, but it's only through the story that I'm able to access the motivations of the characters, and through them the development and inner logic of the piece.

Can you give me an example of a unit of action?

Take the second scene of the second act of *Arabella*, for instance. The opera guide says, "Fiakermilli serenades Mandryka and the counts". In my score I translate that as follows: "The counts present Fiakermilli to Mandryka in order to titillate him." That's not what Hofmannsthal and Strauss intended with this scene, but the result is a better play and a better story. And the music suits this reinterpretation or nuance so perfectly that perhaps this was, in fact, the writers' hidden intention.

So do you fill out the performance score during the rehearsals?

Even before then. I run through the entire opera on a stage set model. People who work in theatre are always amazed by this since hardly anyone works like that in theatre today. But there, the actors also come to the first rehearsal much less prepared and hardly even know their lines yet. Everything is developed together over the course of a much longer rehearsal period. In opera, the singers have been studying their parts for months and have normally got them down perfectly. This means that I'm standing opposite a singer who has lived with the character for months already and who, naturally, has quite a sophisticated image of that character. It's an image that is all the more stable because he uses his very body to breathe life into it. He actually sings the character. If I were to develop the staging slowly and in an improvised style now, I would have to deal with these characters that I have played no part at all in forming, and it would be difficult to achieve a coherent performance. Irrespective of that, I'd think it disrespectful to the singers if I were the only person to arrive to work unprepared.

But no matter how well prepared you are, you still encounter these fully-developed character profiles.

That's why I try to meet the singers – or the protagonists at least – months beforehand so I can discuss my approach with them. I don't go too much against the grain in terms of the pieces themselves, but in terms of prevailing assumptions about the characters, I often do. For instance, Korngold and his father, who wrote the libretto, viewed Marietta in *Die Tote Stadt* as a vain,

coquettish woman whose only interest is money and who callously takes advantage of her admirer Paul's love. Paul believes that Marietta is the reincarnation of his dead wife. Despite this portrayal of the character, which is really quite awkward, Korngold adds a lot of really heart-felt notes to her music. So I have attempted to legitimise Marietta's actions. She has in fact fallen in love with this strange guy and is driven almost to despair because of how detached he is. This is the only way of giving the character depth and allowing it to develop. Unfortunately, I was unable to meet the singer who played Marietta before rehearsals started, and it took a while for her to let go of this image of the coquettish seductress.

Is the music the key criteria for you? In Manon, you also alluded to the music as the justification for how you read the opera.

The music is the most important thing. And the music is right. I can stage an opera in a way that goes against the text but not in a way that runs counter to the music.

Is that your response to the old question of "prima la musica"?

That response would perhaps be a little one-dimensional. The fact that the music is so important is precisely why it cannot come first in terms of time. For the singer, this phrase seems to suggest that they should wait until they get stimulus from the pit, responding to it by taking a step, making a gesture or whatever. By that point, it's always too late, though. Doing this creates nothing more than an apparent musical illustration of the music that in fact is just a superfluous appendage. You'd be better off giving a concertante performance of the opera. Wagner developed a theory that lends itself well to answering this question. In his view, music drama became necessary in a historical sense because music, once it had been emancipated from dance, was missing its extra-musical foundation, its "Formmotiv" or "formal motive", as he called it. He believed that music needed to be motivated by external elements – he did not believe in absolute music.

So was this his sole reason for creating those grandiose music dramas? To have a legitimate reason for composing?

Yes, exactly. The music responds to the questions posed by the text, the setting and the theatrical scene. No matter how questionable his premise might be, Wagner is right about one thing: This is the only way that musical theatre can work. The singer must use his action to provoke a reaction from the music. He must anticipate the music to – ideally – give the impression that the entire score has been created in that moment as a result of what is happening in the scene. This is naturally much more difficult for the singer, as they can't just sit back and wait until the conductor provides them with a stimulus. They have to recreate everything. They have to compose and conduct the opera. If that is accomplished, the music and the action coalesce almost magnetically. The music can then be experienced from the inside out. For me, that's the ultimate goal of directing an opera.

Let's go back to the staging for a moment. Do you go through the opera scene by scene on the stage set model?

I assign roles to figurines and determine every glance, every turn and every motion. It's a bit of a sluggish process to start with and there is a lot I have to change, but there comes a point when I understand the space and something like the language of the performance emerges. After that, everything goes very smoothly. I write everything down and take photos. With *Arabella*, I did this to an embarrassing degree: I had my prompt book but then also recorded all of the staging in a photo book as well. It was all very nerdy. But it also makes the first phase of rehearsals go much more

smoothly – and much more quickly – even if a lot of things still have to be fitted together and adjusted.

Do you play the music and have the figurines in the model do the motions?

Yes, but sometimes I don't know what to do next so I do the motion myself. And that's when the most mysterious thing in the whole of theatrical work takes place: I take position, visualise what has happened up to this point, put on the music... and then I know exactly what I have to do! Almost every time, I just know what to do. This means that I enter a second reality. I experience the setting while I'm simultaneously conscious of its fictional character. I then know what would be the right thing to do in that moment. In an inexplicable way, the artistic setting infects me and I live, during that moment, in a second reality. It's an extremely uplifting experience.

Does that not happen during the rehearsal?

Yes it does. Similar moments do occur during the rehearsal. But I wouldn't be able to come up with a lot of the things that I do when I'm able to concentrate in the peace and quiet of my own home. The pressure of rehearsal is more conducive to faster, more conventional solutions, not to interesting ones. That's how it is with me, at least. A director like Herbert Fritsch works at his best under pressure.

Do you lay everything down at home or are there scenes that you are only able to develop during the rehearsals?

I try to lay down everything in advance. But there are always one or two scenes that push back. I put these scenes aside, sometimes until the rehearsal and sometimes to just before the première. These scenes sit heavily in my stomach for weeks, even though I know that these scenes often turn out to be the best. It's the same with the narrative problems of a piece that we spoke about earlier, and which often prompt me to adopt a certain approach to staging.

What type of scenes push back?

The ones where there are no proscribed actions. The points where there is no "arrangement". "He enters from the right so she must go left in order to keep the line of sight open" and the like. In *Arabella* there was a waltz, during which nothing happened, between two scenes in the second act. A minute of music with no action - what do you do with that? To resolve situations like this, I attempt to determine exactly how I got to this moment in the piece and where I have to go. I do this countless times. Syd Feld, the screenwriting coach, calls it "hitting your head against the typewriter". "In the next scene, Zdenka sends a very important letter to her lover. She sends a letter, sends a letter..." And suddenly I've found the answer. I had Zdenka dance a little waltz with the letter in anticipation of her forthcoming night of passion. That was very touching. Beautiful moments that really stick in the mind can come from slight imperfections in the piece. That's why Shakespeare's plays are always staged so unusually. Whilst his plays are ingenious, Shakespeare is by no means perfect so the director always comes across these gaps that need to be filled in.

Are you always able to easily apply what you have created at home in the rehearsal?

Not always but I usually can. The first phase of rehearsals is largely about communicating the staging I have prepared to the singers, to check that it works and to study it. I do that as quickly as possible and skip over the details to begin with. The main point is to bring the singers together in a

unit. Stanislavsky said that the more closely the mental images of each participant coincide, the better the performance can be. The sooner the singers are able to get their bearings and imagine the staging on their internal map, the more confident they will feel and the sooner they will be ready to absorb the details and the deeper aspects of the staging.

Are the singers receptive to your suggestions?

The singers all have very different temperaments. Some do exactly what I say and not an iota more, so when I see the performance in front of me, my staging looks alarmingly bare. Some understand what I have said amazingly quickly and improvise the entire scene according to the sense they think I had in mind. At those moments I feel like a painter who wants to put a line here and a dot there, but instead someone fills the entire picture with paint. I then have to slowly scrape it off again to find out whether what I intended works.

And what happens if it doesn't work? If the timing or the idea itself doesn't work?

Then we need to work together to find something new. In these situations, the singers make suggestions or I offer something up. And if nothing comes to us at all, I do what I did at home. I enter the fictional setting and hope that it will reveal the next step. Usually it does, quite by itself and without any great deal of mysticism. Nevertheless, it's an extremely intense existential experience. If I say to the singer, "Let me take your place", it's a bit like saying, "Give me the glass for a moment so I can take a sip." I enter this second reality with just the same clarity. I taste it just as strongly as I would the wine from his glass. I become part of a current; it's almost a religious experience, and certainly the most fulfilling one to be had in stage direction. And when the idea finally comes, it's a discovery rather than an invention.

So how do you explain being able to find a solution when your colleagues can't? They are just as deeply emerged in the setting as you are.

Because I'm able to see the whole picture in my head and see where the missing detail should fit into it. When I have this objective in mind, I'm able to go beyond the given. In my inner world, the second reality is more pronounced than it is with singers who have only recently been confronted with it. I sense the direction and the feeling of harmony once the detail materialises. Once it all suddenly comes together. There are always one or two people within a team who feel exactly the same way and are able to make wonderful suggestions. The others eye them suspiciously because they think they must have access to some secret knowledge that's been withheld from them. Those people just have a clearer mental image, however. The conductor Sergiu Celibidache taught me a lot, and he called this process "transcendence". That may sound a bit esoteric but what he meant, very simply, was being able to move beyond something. The conductor must somehow be able to go beyond the tonal phenomena that confront him. Otherwise he would have no standard by which to judge them. That means that, somewhere within his mind, he has already reached his destination and knows how to get there. The same applies to any artistic process.

When rehearsals have finished, when everyone is that bit closer to the end goal, staging must come a little easier.

You often hear how an important scene was changed shortly before the première and you ask yourself how that was even possible, given how little time was left. The fact that this happens doesn't mean that you were just meandering along up to this point. This is Stanislavsky's exact thought on the matter – by the end, the mental image is so mature and sophisticated, and everyone

agrees with it so completely, that the singers or the director are able to change an action in an instant or reinvent it without damaging the architecture of the production. The second reality is able to support everyone at this point.

Do you work according to Stanislavsky's system?

Not really, and it wouldn't really work in opera, but I find his concept of the "super-objective" really exciting. He talks about the super-objective of the play, a sort of quintessence, and the super-objective of the parts, and that is very interesting. He was an actor himself and was due to play Argan in Molière's *The Imaginary Invalid*. At first he attempted to play the part by saying, "I want to be ill". That didn't work, however. At some point or other he came upon the formula, "I want people to see me as a sick person", and this formula enabled him to crack it! That was Argan's super-objective. A formula that stands above the character and helps the actor to give his actions the right direction. Tom Hanks said that he was only able to play the businessman in the film *A Hologram for the King* once he had found the following formula: "A man who has lost his self-confidence but who must act as if he hasn't". Now that's something an actor can act! A formula like "an American in Saudi Arabia" would have given him nothing to go on. It would have been too literary.

Do you have an example from your own work?

The character of Manon. In my production, she'd had enough of cynical Paris society. She wanted to experience sincere, untempered emotion. Her super-objective is, "I want to be an innocent". Arabella's another one. She'd heard and read a lot about profound emotions and real love, yet she is unable to find them in herself. Her super-objective is, "I want to feel something". This kind of formula is a huge help to a lot of singers and acts like a sort of mantra.

What methods do you use to communicate the personality of the character to the singer?

I talk a lot and explain my approach, but I also know that a lot of singers don't really find that this helps them to play a character. Everything becomes more concrete during the rehearsal, when the singer is required to act out a certain action with the motivation x in the context y . Before the rehearsal, I was telling the soprano Betsy Horne about the opera *Arabella*. Now Betsy and I talk about a fictional character who's right in front of us and who is supposed to take on a life of its own over the course of these seven weeks. I never criticise Betsy personally. Betsy and I work together as a team to create this character – as the director, I look at the character from the outside and she as the singer, from the inside.

It's more difficult for the singer to separate herself from the fictional character than it is for you...

Most of them are very aware of this difference. But that's the mystery of acting. Even a three-year-old can experience a chair as a tractor whilst never forgetting that it is, in fact, a chair. The interesting thing is that actors talk about their parts in the first and third person. They say, for instance, "I'm a burned-out banker who...", "Frank is a naïve musician who..." and so on. Their job is founded on this duality, this duality of I and He. If I go on stage to demonstrate how I would perform an embrace, for instance, then I sense this difference very keenly. I'm not embracing the singer. I'm embracing the fictional character. That's why neither of us feel any shame while doing it either.

Hegel viewed theatre as the highest form of art, since in theatre, a fictional event is presented as if it were a real event.

Yes, that's the great thing about theatre. And that's why acting, which is more often viewed as being on the fringes of art (if you consider it at all), is paradigmatic for a very essential aspect of art: the experience of fiction. This is also the essence of writing. It's a spiritual experience of the subject matter, of acting out the subject matter on the stage in the mind. Anybody who writes has this experience. Novalis even said that writing is to experience language itself.

So what style of acting do you like your singers to employ?

Hitchcock gave the best stage direction: "Don't act!" The singer should execute the action rather than act out executing the action. Very often you see that a singer doesn't, for example, put on his glasses because he wants to read a letter. He acts it, "Oh, there's a letter and I can't read it. What should I do?" The next thing he acts is: "No problem – there are my glasses. I want to put them on". And finally: "Excellent – I can see everything perfectly with my glasses. So – what does this letter say?" He is afraid that the action is too mundane like this. Too bare and unartistic, and so he serves it on a platter. This is what Hitchcock meant by "Don't act!" There can be no difference between the performer and his action. They have to be completely identical – the character *is* what he does.

What do you say to the singers when this happens?

In these situations, it's usually enough to make them aware that it's happening. Then there is the tendency that actors have to enlarge the individual action. In *Manon*, a bouquet plays a key role. I asked the actor who was playing Brétigny to cast a casual glance at the bouquet as he entered the stage. He did this and I was happy. At the next rehearsal, he saw the flowers and reached out to them with his hand. I didn't think this was as good. On the third occasion, he picked up the flowers, sniffed them and put them back. I stepped in at this point: "Please – just look at them. That's enough!"

The same happens with theatre productions in the repertoire. The performances are becoming longer and longer...

Yes, and it's kind of nice when certain sequences gain a momentum of their own. You can't be too much of a control freak in these situations – you have to allow the piece to take on a life of its own in the sense of the "Werkstatt" that we already talked about. As an assistant director responsible for the evening's performance, you have to be less dogmatic than I was at 19. You have to monitor the performance, stepping in when the staging as a whole starts to become distorted. A bigger danger, even at the rehearsal stage, is when the singers execute the action but don't believe their action conveys what it's about, so they add a commentary to it. In my production of *Arabella*, there's a huge increase in tension during Mandryka's first encounter with the father of the woman he has fallen in love with. He approaches the father, closer and closer, breaking all of the rules of etiquette. As the music hits its climax, he suddenly stops, acts as if nothing has happened and sits back down. Realistic lighting returns, the father gives a sigh of relief – and the audience with him. In one of the last rehearsals, the singer who was playing Mandryka suddenly made a mollifying gesture just before he sat down. All of the tension that had built up was gone. The act of sitting back down is in itself a return to normality. A gesture explaining that fact does nothing to support that. Instead, it saps the action of its strength. It brought to mind something that was really pivotal for me from an aesthetic point of view, and that was a Picasso sculpture that I saw when I was very young. It was one of these small sculptures made from folded metal that was painted. And it occurred to me just how economic Picasso had been in his work. He either bent the metal or painted a line. Never both at the same time. The same applies to theatre. Theatre is extremely compact and the chain of actions on stage must be executed with exceptional precision and linked together as economically as possible.

It's either a bend or a line, a gesture or taking a seat. In other words, sitting down *is* the gesture. This also demonstrates how little is achieved by comparing theatre to reality. In real life you could do both.

Where does the singers' desire to comment on their actions come from?

At that moment the singer thinks my god, I'm not doing enough here. What I'm doing doesn't match the intention of the scene. Yet it does: within the context! David Mamet put it as follows: "The boat has to look like a boat. The sail doesn't have to look like a boat." But we always think that every detail has to look like the whole. So we try to act everything at once: the action, its meaning and its context. The director is responsible for this, though. That's how labour is divided. And that makes sense. Noelte always said, "Being a director means sitting in the stalls." Only then are you able to see the whole. The director is responsible for ensuring that all of these simple actions – including all the elements, the space and the lighting - constitute the sense of the piece.

Is that problem perhaps linked to the loss of control, to the fear of placing something in someone else's hands? Perhaps this is what leads to the desire to intensify, expand upon and comment upon simple actions?

Possibly. It's all about trust. You have to be able to let go. Only then can you gain something. If you try to retain control, you lose. I'm not saying that you lose yourself. But rather that you lose sight of the reason why you started in the first place.

We're now right in the middle of the rehearsal process. What key phases are still to come?

The next phase is the nice one, the one where the director is able to take a step back and take in the first, lengthier scenes in the production. In film, this would be the editing phase. Those first few weeks in theatre, when the outline of the performance starts to develop, correspond to the arduous phase of checking the material in film. Now you can see quite clearly what works and what doesn't. Now you can refine the performance and round it out. Next come the final rehearsals. This is when all of a sudden, as if by some conspiracy, all of the differences of opinion that were there during the production phase are set aside and everyone sticks together to give a good première performance. The director moves from the stage to the auditorium and watches the performance under realistic conditions. Yet again, everything depends upon experiencing that second reality at this point. I have to submerge myself fully into what is happening on stage to assess what works, and I'm very sensitive to disturbances of any sort during that time. If a singer enters the hall during his break or the assistant director speaks to me, I'm torn out of that second reality and lose many precious minutes trying to get back into it again. Then comes the dress rehearsal. As with all of the final rehearsals, I don't give criticism to the performers in person. I send an e-mail so that the singers can read it in peace and quiet. They're more likely to take it in that way. And well... then, just like that, I'm free and waiting for the première, hoping that the second reality kicks in...

Is there anyone who you model yourself on artistically?

I had wonderful teachers. I think of Esrig when developing a concept, Noelte during rehearsals, and Celibidache... That isn't the same as having a role model, though. If I had to name one person who I feel close to, it's Ravel. In him I find analytical rigor, purism, clarity and a sensitivity to old forms, as well as elegance, ease and a hint of metropolitanism. And he understood how to bring everything together into one sensory flow, along with a sense of melancholy... I would love to work like that. To move people to tears.