

1. **THE ARTS: A brilliant glimpse of the abyss: MUSIC-THEATRE POITIERS: 'Vertiges' might seem a pretentious idea, but it turns out to be funny and warm, writes Stephen Pettitt**

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THE ARTS: A brilliant glimpse of the abyss: MUSIC-THEATRE POITIERS: 'Vertiges' might seem a pretentious idea, but it turns out to be funny and warm, writes Stephen Pettitt

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By STEPHEN PETTITT

Poitiers, the location of a famous battle between the French and the English at the beginning of the Hundred Years War back in 1356, is nowadays a civilised two-hour trip on the TGV from Paris. The town, built on a hill, is picturesque, retaining much of its ancient architecture. It also houses a renowned university whose students considerably augment its permanent population of some 85,000 souls and contribute to the need for the provision of a stimulating cultural programme.

That need is met by Le Theatre-Scène Nationale de Poitiers, the decentralised, publicly funded arts organisation presided over since 1992 by Denis Garnier. Musically, this season offers an impressive selection of contemporary jazz as well as classical concerts given by Philippe Herreweghe's Orchestre des Champs Elysees, by the Orchestre Poitou-Charente (both are resident groups), and by visiting ensembles and soloists.

Facilities are, however, far from ideal, so it was at the modest cultural centre just outside the town, called (not very appropriately) Beaulieu, that I, along with a packed house of 300 or so, witnessed the first performance of *Vertiges*, a music-theatre piece which the Theatre-Scène Nationale commissioned from the young percussionist-composer Jean-Pierre Drouet and the playwright-poet Patrick Kermann. The premise of the work, whose name translates as *Vertigo*, might at first seem pretentious. It is to do with the meaning, or rather the meaninglessness, of life, with our most fundamental fear, that of falling into the eternal abyss. It asks the most fundamental questions.

Kermann, who made a considerable mark for himself in France during his 10-year career, killed himself in February last year, shortly after finishing the libretto. He was only just into his 30s. Though decidedly and challengingly abstract, this 90-minute work is, even to a non-native speaker, at once brilliant, funny, touching, thought-provoking and warm, a

rhapsody, as the blurb had it, on the theme of human frailty. Kermann's text is a kind of music all by itself, exploring sound and meaning, playing with words and syllables, hypnotically repeating itself, exploring the lovely resonances of the language in which he worked.

The piece is scored for three distinct groups - eight instrumentalists from the ensemble *Ars Nova* (directed by Philippe Nahon), four opera singers (Ainhoa Garmendia, Marie Bry, Thierry Cantero and Fernand Bernadi) from the Opera de Bordeaux, and seven actors, or rather clowns, of the *Compagnie Lyrique Le Grain*. The main focus is upon the clowns, who also sing and play a variety of instruments, perform tongue-tieing word games, and move with perfectly timed choreography and athleticism, whether of limb or facial muscle, in a stunning exhibition of finely honed *commedia dell'arte* derived skills.

They work on the simplest of stage settings whose only furniture is a raised barrier - the edge of the world, of existence, behind which we are to imagine a vertiginous drop - running the full width of the stage, and, on each side of the platform, a balcony with decorative railings. They are we; frail, honest humans facing up to their singular ultimate destiny, showing us the light and dark, the fantastic and the fearsome that lie behind our existences. Drouet's music for them is primarily, compellingly, inventively rhythmic.

The operatic quartet are by contrast characters of convention, two couples whose opening lines are pointillistic, frozen, stylised, mannered, delivered from the two balconies, but who later express more rhapsodic emotions. The instrumental contribution, given from a heightened platform behind a gauze screen (or rather, we are told, "from above the void"), is less enslaved to the notion of pulse and in consequence seems more atmosphere than substance, though repeated listenings could change that perception, and the playing is beautiful in tone and poise.

The production is not confining itself to Poitiers. Audiences in the town of Oullins can see it on March 22 and 23, and it tours to the Grand Theatre, Bordeaux, and to Albi, in April. As for Poitiers itself, the hot news, coinciding with the opening of this production, is that a new auditorium complex for the town has been commissioned, following a competition, from the Portuguese architect Joao Luis Carrilho Da Graca. The Pounds 18m project, financed equally by the state, the Poitou-Charente regional government and the town, will include a 700-seat theatre as well as a 1,100-seat concert hall. Opening is scheduled for 2004.

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