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2 AN INTERPLAY OF PASSION AND SPIRIT

The Nightingale's to Blame

Richard E. McGregor

SIMON HOLT'S ONE-ACT OPERA *The Nightingale's to Blame* was written between 1996 and 1998 and given its first performance at the Huddersfield Contemporary Music Festival the same year.¹ For this first excursion into the realm of theatre Holt returned to the work of Federico García Lorca. He used David Johnston's translation of the source play, preserving its basic structure: a Prologue and three scenes.²

Holt's attraction to the dark, sensuous imagery of Lorca's poetry had resulted, over the previous fourteen years, in four works using words or images from the poems.³ The opera's title makes direct reference to the bird which the poet used as a symbol for illusion. Lorca's original title for the play was (in translation) *The Love of Don Perlimplín for Belisa in the Garden*. As a musician himself, he built numerous musical allusions into the play, which has proved attractive to various composers as an opera subject, perhaps most notably Bruno Maderna, whose radiophonic work dates from 1962.⁴ Assassinated in 1936 during the Spanish Civil War, Lorca did not live to see any of the operatic adaptations of his text. The work occupied him between 1926 and 1929, but fell foul of Spanish censors prior to its planned first performance in 1929,

ostensibly because the theatre company had failed to observe mourning for

¹ Details of performers in the Opera North and the Vienna productions are listed in Appendix A under H 27. Further performance dates, and the piano-vocal score, are available for inspection on www.musicsalesclassical.com/composer/work/714/11597 (21 Feb 2017).

² Federico García Lorca, *Yerma* and *The Love of Don Perlimplín for Belisa in the Garden*, transl. with notes by David Johnston (London, 1990).

³ Holt's Lorca-inspired works up to 1998: *Era madrugada* (1984: H 7), *Canciones* (1986: H 11), *Ballad of the Black Sorrow* (1988: H 13), *Six Caprices* (1998: H 28).

⁴ A list, by no means exhaustive, of composers other than Maderna who have written operas to the same text includes Vittorio Rieti (1949/52), Arnold Elston (1958), Wolfgang Fortner (1962), Karel Goeyvaerts (1972), Conrad Susa (1984) and Miguel Ángel Coria (1992).

the recently deceased Queen Mother, [but] in all likelihood it was because the role of a cuckold was to be acted by a retired army officer, which could have damaged the dignity of the military.¹

It was finally given in 1933 during the period of the Second Republic.

BACKGROUND TO THE OPERA

The play's main character is Don Perlimplín, an 'aging bachelor'. In the Prologue, his maid Marcolfa, no younger than he, berates him for having passed his fiftieth year and being still unmarried. She draws his attention to the beautiful Belisa, a sensuous woman easily half his age, highly eligible, who lives next door: we hear her singing. Under Marcolfa's prompting Perlimplín calls out loudly; Belisa appears on her balcony, almost unclothed (b. 355). Perlimplín next pays court to Belisa's mother, who agrees to the match: he is wealthy, after all. As Belisa 'throws open the shutters on her balcony' (b. 499), the scene changes.

Scene One takes place on the wedding night; it is apparent that Perlimplín has no knowledge of women and is incapable of consummation.² Two *Duendes* appear (b. 747) and determine to play a trick on the bridegroom while he is asleep. Belisa cuckolds him by having five lovers in her bedroom during the night, who, as Marcolfa will inform the Don, represent five different nationalities of the earth. As dawn breaks (b. 932), Perlimplín appears with golden pair of stag's antlers on his head – representing his status as cuckold. However, he tells Belisa that he is now in love with her, having spied on her through the keyhole as she dressed, earlier the previous day. Belisa dodges his questions about the meaning of the hats and ladders which have been left by the balconies and, as the nightingale sings, he realises that she has no soul; there is only one way open to him, as he believes, to give her one.³

Scene Two finds Perlimplín discovering from a distressed Marcolfa what has happened during the night. As Belisa comes in, Perlimplín hides momentarily, listening as Belisa talks about a lover. She and Perlimplín come face to face: then a stone with a message wrapped round it is thrown through the window. Perlimplín makes Belisa read it to him, and it appears that it comes from a mysterious stranger in a red cloak with whom, although she has never seen his face, she has become obsessed. Rather than assuming the role of jealous lover Perlimplín seems to change and, almost like a father figure, declares that he will help her to meet the stranger. He tells her to be in the garden later and the stranger will come to her.

¹ John London, 'Federico García Lorca', *Censorship: A world encyclopaedia* ed. Derek Jones (London, 2001), pp. 906–7.

² See bb. 713–16, later in Scene 1.

³ The further significance of the nightingale in the opera will be explored in relation to Ex. 2.1.

Scene Three takes place in the garden. Marcolfa finds Perlimplín there, reminiscing; they discuss Belisa's infatuation. Perlimplín hides behind the rose bushes to watch; offstage, the *Duendes* and Belisa's mother comment on the action. Belisa sings alone in the moonlight; the red-cloaked figure appears only briefly and is immediately followed by Don Perlimplín. Since Belisa loves the stranger, Perlimplín swears he will kill him so that the young man will love her 'with the endless love of the dead'.¹ Belisa hopes to intervene but the red-cloaked figure staggers in, face at first concealed. Perlimplín is dying of a stab wound to the heart which he has inflicted on himself, although Belisa does not understand this. Dying, he tells Belisa he has given her the soul she never had, while in complete bewilderment she keeps asking where the red-cloaked stranger is, not realising that the stranger and Don Perlimplín were one. She does not register Marcolfa's line, 'We'll lay him out in his young man's suit of clothes, so red and so fine, that he used to wear under your balcony'.²

TABLE 2.1 Structure plan of *The Nightingale's to Blame* (source: piano-vocal score).

<i>Scene divisions</i>	<i>Characters</i>	<i>Stage setting</i>
Prologue Bb. 1–509	Don Perlimplín Marcolfa Belisa Belisa's mother	A room in Don Perlimplín's house with an upright piano, centre stage.
Scene 1, p. 49 Bb. 510–1099	Don Perlimplín Belisa 2 <i>Duendes</i>	A room in the same house containing a splendid four-poster bed.
Scene 2, p. 103 Bb. 1100–1373	Don Perlimplín Marcolfa Belisa	Don Perlimplín's dining room.
Scene 3, p. 131 Bb. 1374–1792	Don Perlimplín Belisa Marcolfa 2 <i>Duendes</i> and Belisa's mother (voices offstage)	A garden of cypresses and orange-trees.

Although this plot could be thought of as a version of the Beauty and the Beast tale, Lorca introduced *Duendes* into the narrative. In traditional Spanish folklore the *Duendes* are household spirits that can be gremlin-like and troubling, but, in the Spanish cultural context *duende* has become an expression for passion, spirit and inspiration, and therefore almost untranslatable as a conceptual idea in English.³ Thus *duende* becomes 'dark sound', the trouble in the voice that gives

¹ Holt, *The Nightingale's to Blame*, piano-vocal score (London, 1999), p. 161.

² *Ibid.*, p. 171.

³ Nathaniel Mackey, 'Cante Moro', *Sound States: innovative poetics and acoustical technologies*, ed. Adalaide Morris (Chapel Hill, NC, 1997), pp. 194–212 at 196–7.