

Ming Tsao: Die Geisterinsel. Project description

(GUPEA 2014)

I was commissioned by the Staatsoper Stuttgart to rework a relatively unknown opera of the same title by Johann Rudolph Zumsteeg, a contemporary and champion of Mozart. The librettist was Wilhelm Friedrich Gotter who based his libretto on Shakespeare's *The Tempest*. Gotter's libretto, written in a high Classical German style reminiscent of Goethe, imbues Shakespeare's text with Enlightenment values of that time. Caliban, an ambiguous figure at the very least in Shakespeare's text, is turned into a buffoonish villain in Gotter's libretto in order for good and evil characters to be clearly delineated. Shakespeare's story is open ended (Prospero leaves the island to Caliban) but Gotter's libretto is closed (Caliban throws himself into the ocean and Miranda and Fernando are subsequently married). The witch Sycorax is only a memory in Shakespeare's text whereas in Gotter's libretto she remains an evil spirit who terrorizes people when they fall asleep. So many differences between the two texts only highlight the differences in cultural and class values between Shakespeare and Gotter's audiences.

In my reworking of the Zumsteeg opera, and consequently of the Gotter libretto, I condensed the story to focus only on Prospero, Miranda, Fernando (or Ferdinand in Shakespeare's play), Caliban and the Geisterchor (a choir of spirits that belong to the island). I chose two actors to portray Caliban, representing qualities that have either been taught by Prospero through learning his language or that are closer to the wilderness of the island where he was raised.

The opera consists of one act divided into 13 scenes as follows: Die Geisterinsel 1. Steine (Chor mit Steinen) 2. Blumen, meine ganze Habe—Miranda (Chor im Hintergrund) 3. Tiefer ins Leben—Miranda/Chor 4. Schrecken, die uns drohn—Miranda/Prospero 5. In der Hülle dieses Sklaven—Caliban (Chor and Miranda/Fernando im Hintergrund) 6. Fremdling, höre meinen Willen—Fernando/Prospero (Chor im Hintergrund) 7. Vor des nahen Sturmes Grimme—Fernando 8. Traurige Korallen—Prospero/Miranda/Fernando 9. „Where the Bee sucks“—Prospero 10. Der Sturm (Chor mit Pauken) 11. Geisterchoral—Chor 12. Ich heiße Caliban—Caliban/Chor 13. Sandfall (Chor mit KieselIn) Throughout the opera, Prospero instructs Miranda and Fernando to count corals in order not to fall asleep and succumb to the unconscious world of dreams where Prospero's language holds no power. By Scene 9, they do eventually fall asleep, including Prospero who cannot resist the “dulcet tones and fragrances of enchanted sleep.” The music during this scene draws from Robert Johnson's “Where the Bee sucks” (1660) which was used in Shakespeare's original production of *The Tempest*, in order to show the leakage of Shakespeare's world into Gotter's, symbolizing the waning of Prospero's power. In the text *They that have powre to hurt: A Specimen of a Commentary on Shakespeares Sonnets, 94*, Cambridge poet J.H. Prynne in near exhaustive depth draws out the historical and linguistic nuance from each word of Shakespeare's Sonnet 94. Beginning with the word “They,” Prynne comments “we do not know who they are.” “They,” most likely, refer to a class of beings who have learned to self-regulate their power: the power of beauty in Miranda's case and the power of language in Prospero's if we think of the sonnet as spoken by Caliban, which I have done in Scene 5. “It is not that the human figures here are presumably dark within the inner world of the poem, since

to each other they must at least have been extremely close; rather just that to the outside view they present as anonymous, beyond any reckonable perspective. The reader infers an uneasy distance, perhaps widening, between the implied speaker and the persons of whom he speaks." Because of this widening distance, one senses a hidden violence in the sonnet waiting to be released. My strategy was to find isolated words that Caliban speaks in Gotter's libretto that could forcibly intrude into the smooth sonnet form, to break it open and release that violence, often through the sound or meaning of the intruding words.