



The Love Story Behind Bartok's 7 Dark Doors



Lilikoi

Gabor Bretz, in the role of the murderous duke.

By DANIEL J. WAKIN
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Chris Lee

So asks a speaker in the prologue of “Bluebeard’s Castle,” Bartok’s mysterious and otherworldly [opera](#).

“Listen and wonder,” comes the answer, with this hint: “Your eyes are curtains, and now you raise them.”

Maybe, you see, it’s all in your head.

The prospect is chilling for an opera based on the duke of fable who murdered his wives and stashed their bodies in his castle basement.

Spouses will have plenty to talk about after hearing “Bluebeard’s Castle,” which the [New York Philharmonic](#) will perform under the conductor [Esa-Pekka Salonen](#) beginning on Friday at Avery Fisher Hall. Singing in the original metered Hungarian, the bass [Gabor Bretz](#) portrays the bloody wife killer of legend, Bluebeard, and the mezzo-soprano [Michelle DeYoung](#) his latest trophy wife, Judith. The actress [Marthe Keller](#) will recite the

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Esa-Pekka Salonen will conduct the New York Philharmonic in Bartok's dark and mysterious "Bluebeard's Castle" this week.

prologue.

The opera, Bartok's only work in the form, lasts but an hour, so the Philharmonic and Mr. Salonen are performing it with Ligeti's "Concert Romanesc" and Haydn's Symphony No. 7. This is the third program in Hungarian Echoes, the Philharmonic's continuing festival of Hungarian music.

On its face "Bluebeard's Castle" is a straightforward tale, essentially a conversation between husband and wife. The action consists of the opening and closing of seven doors. What's behind them is conveyed by lighting, sung descriptions and Bartok's brilliant orchestral writing. The lush score lies within the vocal realm of [Debussy's](#) "Pelléas et Mélisande."

The opera opens with Judith arriving at her forbidding new home to brooding string lines, fresh from a happy life with her family. Despite being aware of unpleasant rumors, she says she wants to bring light and air and warmth to this dark, dank, closed-up place.

And so she embarks on persuading Bluebeard to open the castle's seven locked doors. Each reveals an aspect of her new husband's life, usually pretty grim. The opening of the doors yield a series of spectacular and colorful musical moments.

"The miracle of this piece," Mr. Salonen said in a recent interview, is how "every door has its very distinct world."

Eerie sounds emerge from behind Door No. 1, often rendered as sighs or moans. (Mr. Salonen said he would use sound samples provided by a technician.) The door reveals instruments of torture, accompanied by a bone-rattling xylophone.

Brass fanfares lend atmosphere to the opening of Door No. 2, to Bluebeard's armory.

Door No. 3 reveals blood-stained jewels and gold, with fluttering flutes and the tings of a celesta. Mr. Salonen points out that the jewels glitter in a shining D major.

"As Judith is admiring this stuff," Mr. Salonen said, "Bartok starts introducing wrong notes," reflecting her growing awareness of the evil connected with his riches. "The tonality rots away."

Door No. 4 opens to a blood-flecked secret garden, replete with harp, pastoral horn and chirping flute.

The work's big climax comes at Door No. 5, which opens onto a vista of Bluebeard's lands and lofty mountains, a glorious blast of C major, topped by Judith's "Ah!" sounded with a high C.

"It's so exciting," Ms. DeYoung said. "The orchestra and the horns and the organ and everybody are playing as loud as possible. It carries you right up to the high C. As a mezzo, its exhilarating. Without that orchestration it would be terrifying."

Judith has all along been pressing a reluctant Bluebeard for permission to open the doors. Her love for him drives her, she sings. Bluebeard warns her to be careful about what she might find.

At No. 6 she really has to talk him into it, and is rewarded with the sight of a lake of tears. Mr. Salonen called it "one of the saddest moments in all music." And "incredibly powerful."

A long orchestral climax builds slowly before Bluebeard grants the key to door No. 7, as Judith declares she now knows that the rumors of uxoricide are true. The final nightmare is revealed: the figures of three Bluebeard wives emerge from the room. Judith follows them back inside.



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What to make of all this?

One way to start is face value. Mr. Salonen likes to portray Bluebeard in “sad, dark and not always so aggressive colors,” he said, a depiction of the essential loneliness of man.

“Ultimately there is a certain type of vulnerability, which is deeply touching and endearing,” he continued. “Judith in a way is the strong one in this. Her actions are being fueled by love and the confidence of youth and the confidence of beauty — and even at the end, in a sense. She goes into that room, but she doesn’t go as a victim. She goes because she accepts it.”

Mr. Salonen sees Judith in the company of Wagnerian women who sacrifice themselves, like Brünnhilde.

Mr. Bretz sees Bluebeard as a lonely man, “longing for love without questions,” he said, but not finding it: a distant Hungarian relative of [Mozart](#)’s Don Giovanni.

“I have one wife and six children,” Mr. Bretz added. “It’s very hard to imagine him to be a cruel man.”

“Bluebeard’s Castle” can also be seen as “more than just the story of a bloodthirsty middle-aged guy killing wives and keeping them in a zombie state,” Mr. Salonen said.

It is at heart a psychodrama about the complex relationship of any man and any woman, portraying the efforts of a woman to know the secret thoughts of her lover, the danger that comes from too much knowledge and the mix of affection and cruelty that can infuse a relationship.

And it works on the level of deeper metaphor. A son of the composer, Peter Bartok, writing in his recent edition of the opera, calls the work “the story of everyone’s life.” The wives represent periods in Bluebeard’s life and the “accumulation of memory that becomes our vast estate,” he wrote.

We spread both good and pain to those around us. “In a sense, we are all Bluebeards,” Mr. Bartok added. “In another sense we fill the role of a Judith.”

Mr. Salonen said he agreed with that view but went a step further: Bluebeard does not want to accept that all we have left of life is memory.

“By keeping the wives under lock and key in the chamber, he’s trying to counteract the inevitability of time,” Mr. Salonen said. “It really deals with the issues of memory and the pain of realizing that the passage of time is inevitable and irreversible.”

Mr. Salonen’s Finnish origins deliver an odd nonmusical connection: his language and Hungarian are part of the same Finno-Ugric group. (Welcome, too, Estonian.) He occasionally hears words in common, he said. More important for music, the accentuation is similar. The accent usually lies on the first syllable of a word, on the downbeat, as it were. That is where the “Bartokian rhythm” comes from, Mr. Salonen said, the emphasis on the short notes when they lead into a long one, as opposed to “the German idea” of the emphasis on the long note when it follows short ones.

Mr. Salonen also finds distant similarities between Finnish and Hungarian folk music, he said, “not so much tonally but in a certain spirit of basic expression, darkness and sadness and almost desperation of both nations’ temperaments.”

Bartok and his librettist, Bela Balazs, finished their work in 1911 and entered it in a one-act opera competition but did not win a prize. It was not performed until 1918, at the [Royal Opera House](#) in Budapest on a double bill with their ballet “The Wooden Prince.”

When he wrote “Bluebeard’s Castle” Bartok had been married just two years.

He dedicated it to his wife.

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