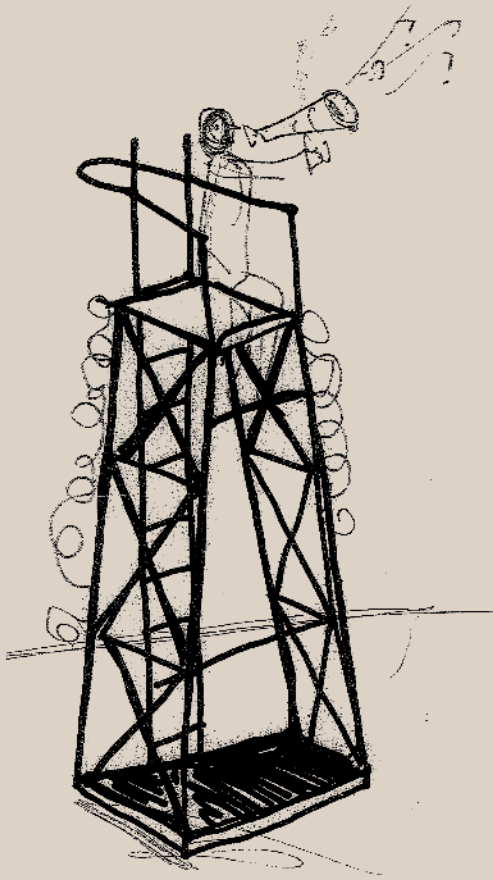


The Emperor of Atlantis

Director's Notes

by James Conway



Sketches by designer,
Neil Irish

I have known *The Emperor of Atlantis* for many years now, and produced it once before at Kilmainham Gaol in Ireland. I did not direct that production, and had not thought to direct this one: I guess I also feared that I might be overwhelmed by the circumstances of its creation at Terezin.

But I love the piece, and I am happy it has fallen to me to work with Peter Selwyn, the singers, players and designers. I do not think that I will realise every intention of Ullmann, or Kien. In truth, it seems clear to me that the writer and composer had different attitudes to the power and purpose of art, and that that they viewed their own imminent deaths in different ways. Though it was written at Terezin, this delicate, powerful opera has a life outside of Terezin, just as all the artists there were part of a culture that was more than Terezin.

Ullmann's own rather picaresque career prior to his imprisonment, his involvement with famous musicians and gifted poets, is captivating. His songs – a number of which we are performing in recitals in London, Leeds and Hull (see page 32) – are extraordinarily rich and beautiful, and his piano sonatas and chamber music compel interest. But what seems clear is that his time at Terezin gave a sharp focus to his creativity, and a focus too for his eloquent pity, that most underestimated of feelings.

I decided not to pair this opera with another short masterpiece. With double bills it is notoriously difficult not to dwarf one or the other, usually the more delicate. This opera speaks quietly, with humour and sincerity.

Given the exquisite treatment of a Lutheran chorale favoured by Bach at the end of *Atlantis*, I thought to preface the opera with a staging of a passion Cantata – not *Ein feste Burg*, which famously treats the same chorale, but *Christ lag in Todesbanden*, intimately

connected by theme and in reference ('Oh death, where is thy sting? O grave, where is thy victory?'). It is unusual, I grant, but then nothing about the opera is usual. I did not want an interval after 20 minutes, or a queue at the bar to challenge the tendons joining the cantata and its assertions with the opera and its questions; nor did I want a current 'early music' approach to obscure how the cantata might have been performed, with instruments available, in Terezin.

The opera's conclusion, I confess, does make me weep, almost every time I hear it. Can something be poignant and terrible at the same time? Though it may seem that they 'go gentle into that good night', it is not so. It seems to me that in Ullmann's vision, the living do not go nameless, numberless, they do not go without pity and grace, however horrible the hours of death and months of powerlessness.

