

Interview

A Struggle for Memory

Composer Hèctor Parra on his new opera “Justice”

by Luis Velasco-Pufleau January 18, 2024

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Director Milo Rau and countertenor Serge Kaduji in Kolwezi, Democratic Republic of the Congo • Photo © Hèctor Parra

The Catalan composer Hèctor Parra is the author of a large body of work that builds sonic bridges between arts and society, making connections with the work of writers and artists such as Marie NDiaye, Jaume Plensa and Händl Klaus, or scientists such as the physicist Lisa Randall. His multidisciplinary ear looks for collaborations that ask questions about what it means to be human. Among his many recent compositions, he has created two striking operas: “Les Bienveillantes” (2019), based on the novel by Jonathan Littell, premiered at Opera Ballet Vlaanderen with a libretto by Klaus in a staging by Calixto Bieito; and “Orgia” (2023), premiered in Paris by Ensemble Intercontemporain and also staged by Bieito, based on the first play written by Pier Paolo Pasolini.

“Justice” is his most recent opera, co-produced by the Grand Théâtre de Genève and the Festival Tangente St. Pölten (Austria). Based on a script by director Milo Rau and a libretto by Congolese writer Fiston Mwanza Mujila, the opera will premiere in Geneva on January 22. “Justice” is set in Katanga, an extremely mineral-rich region of the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), whose resources have been mostly exploited by foreign mining companies from the brutal Belgian colonization of the country to the present day. The exploitation of natural resources in this region has often been linked with violence within and between local populations and environmental disasters.

I spoke with Parra earlier this month, after a week of rehearsals for “Justice.”



Hèctor Parra • Photo © Amandine Lauriol

VAN: How does “Justice” relate to your earlier operas “Les Bienveillantes” and “Orgia”?

Hèctor Parra: The three projects emerged separately. But it’s interesting that, although I never intended to link them, there are strong connections between them. You could say that all three projects deal with political issues and fundamental human questions. In “Les Bienveillantes,” the main subject in Jonathan Littell’s novel is undoubtedly fascism and its genocidal consequences. Telling the story of Nazi atrocities from the point of view of an SS officer, the work explores and questions how human beings can engage in genocide.

“Orgia” is based on the play by Pasolini, whom I admire, and who has given a great deal of thought to the origins and consequences of fascism. In “Orgia,” he explores violence in human relationships and clearly denounces how a certain fascism survives and annihilates all traces of humanity in modern society through consumer culture. “Justice” takes as its starting point a concrete case of social injustice directly linked to mining in the Democratic Republic of Congo: a fatal collision between a tanker carrying sulfuric acid destined for a cobalt mine run by the Swiss multinational

Glencore, and a bus on the road between Kolwezi and Lubumbashi. The accident occurred near the village of Kabwe. 21 people died, including several children.

How did you get the idea of creating an opera based on this subject?

Aviel Cahn, the current General Director of the Grand Théâtre de Genève suggested the creation of a new opera in collaboration with stage director Milo Rau. I enthusiastically agreed with his proposal. Milo had been working for over ten years on the civil war in the DRC, in connection with his political theater project “[The Congo Tribunal](#).” The proposal coincided with Milo’s staging of his first opera, Mozart’s “La Clemenza di Tito,” in Geneva. What a shock! After a few months of collective reflection, also with the participation of conductor Titus Engel, Milo put forward the subject of “Justice.” We immediately agreed with the idea and got to work. We strongly believe that opera should also speak about the political problems of today’s society.

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Rau wrote the original screenplay and Fiston Mwanza Mujila the libretto for “Justice.” How did the collaboration go?

Milo already knew Fiston and invited him to collaborate on the project of “Justice.” We were delighted when he agreed to join us. Not only is Fiston from Lubumbashi and very familiar with the history of Katanga, but he also brought his voice, his vision and his language to the project. The collaboration has been extremely rewarding, and I have learned a lot about Congolese musical and artistic traditions.

How has Fiston Mwanza Mujila’s writing influenced your music?

At the start of the project, I was already familiar with Milo’s work, but not yet with Fiston’s. I then discovered his writing and the expressive power of his unique language. The images, repetitions and rhythm of his novel “Tram 83” made a deep impression on me. His poetry and *Kasalas*—which in the Tshiluba language means “calls, invocations, praises”—have had a major influence on my compositional work, together with the Congolese musical traditions of Luba, Hemba, Lulua, Kaonde and Lunda. I was very inspired by the way Fiston stages words, sings them and inhabits them, while creating links with his genealogy, the arts and the destiny of his people. In “Justice,” Fiston plays himself on stage, and is an extraordinary actor and vocal improviser.



The links forged with people and places during the process of composing your works are very important to you. How did this process unfold in “Justice”?

In addition to the links forged within the team through our collaboration and the sharing of our artistic work, right at the start of the process we decided to make a trip to the DRC to meet the people of Lubumbashi and Kabwe, as well as the victims of the accident at the center of the opera’s plot. This encounter was very important to us. Milo made all the arrangements and, in November 2023, we traveled to Katanga. The visit left a deep impression on me. Milo was accompanied by his production team to film videos with Congolese countertenor Serge Kakudji that form part of the opera’s staging. Serge comes from Kolwezi, where the world’s largest cobalt mines are located, and in some of which he worked periodically as a child. We went there to film Serge singing in front of the devastated landscape of the open-pit mines. In “Justice,” he sings and plays the role of Milambo Kayamba, a victim who lost both legs in the bus crash. We were able to meet Milambo and his family in Lubumbashi. Serge talked with him for several hours, getting to know him and exchanging experiences. It was one of the most moving moments of the trip.

Did you have any musical exchanges as well?

Absolutely. During our visits to Kabwe, we met the villagers and some of the victims of the accident. Our exchanges were also musical. Serge sang them the beginning of the aria in Swahili that I composed for the start of the fifth act in memory of one of the children who died in the accident, in this case a girl burnt by sulfuric acid in the collision with the tanker truck. Among the victims present at the time were Yowali Binti and her five-year-old daughter, both of whom also suffered acid burns. Yowali told us of their demands for justice: their wish that the authorities not forget the accident and that those responsible be brought to justice. After Serge’s singing voice, it was the turn of the young people of Kabwe to share their music with us: a traditional song accompanied by percussion and dance. It was an extraordinary moment.



Social injustice and human rights violations are often directly linked to the destruction of ecosystems and environmental disasters. Is this a subject in “Justice”?

Yes, it's well known that mining causes significant environmental damage. In the accident in February 2019, sulfuric acid killed and injured dozens of people, then ended up spilling into the river. They called it an accident, but in fact it happened largely because of the irresponsibility and negligence of the multinational that runs the Mutanda mine. There are passages in “Justice” where the chorus sings of the destruction of the environment in this region, the contamination of the rivers. The fates of human beings and ecosystems are linked. When there is no respect for human beings, there is no respect for nature. When you colonize a region, you destroy it: All colonization is extreme exploitation and to exploit a region in an extreme way, you have to destroy it.

Milo Rau wrote in 2018 in his “Ghent Manifesto”: “The aim is not to depict the real, but to make the representation itself real.” Does “Justice” explore this idea?

Milo's own words state that art should not be made to represent reality, but to change it. I'm certain that poetry has the capacity to drive us, as political beings, to action. Art is not politics *per se*, but can provoke a catharsis that moves us. I think the lyricism of opera is a powerful means of making people act, and they can be moved by the music, by the contact between voice and orchestra, and by the staging. But it also depends on the subject and the way it's treated, on how you explore the limits of opera.



Is your ambition to push these limits?

Exactly, we're trying to push the boundaries of opera as a genre. It's a collective effort, a cross-disciplinary artistic exploration: the political dimension of the story, the staging, the rhythm of the spoken word, the possibilities of the voice, the colors of the orchestration and the limits of the music. There is an extraordinary energy on stage, a struggle for memory and dignity that goes far beyond the context of this creation. ¶

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