

# TODAY'S ZAMAN

## **'The Infernal Comedy': opera arias for a serial killer**

The İstanbul Foundation for Culture and Arts' (İKSVA) International Theater Festival presented big screen star John Malkovich in "The Infernal Comedy" at the Lütfi Kırdar Convention Center on the night of May 14.

It's a touring one-man show, alongside a Baroque orchestra and two operatic divas. It seems like a comedy, but it's not; underneath the glib patter that Malkovich used like a stand-up comedian to inhabit the persona of a serial killer and address the audience, it was more like a sinister psychodrama with extraordinarily beautiful music.



## **Legendary themes reworked**

Don Juan, Don Giovanni: They are two versions of the name of the legendary scoundrel of a man who takes advantage of women. Love 'em and leave 'em. In some cases, kill them, like Jack the Ripper. Jack Unterweger, an Austrian serial killer of the 20th century, was a notorious womanizer who was sentenced to life for the murder of an 18-year-old woman, but was paroled 15 years later. He went on to write a book to tell his story before he committed suicide, after being convicted of 11 more murders. What does this have to do with music?

Much, according to Martin Haselböck, the creator and musical conductor of a production he started in Vienna, titled "The Infernal Comedy: Confessions of a Serial Killer." Following in the footsteps of famous examples with the same theme: W.A. Mozart's "Don Giovanni," C.W. Gluck's "Don Juan" and Kurt Weill's "Threepenny Opera," Haselböck assembled several arias from the operas of Mozart, Gluck, Handel and Vivaldi, where the divas sing of their love for a seductive man who is incapable of fidelity. In this production, co-directed by Michael Sturminger and Malkovich, two sopranos (Bernarda Bobro and Aleksandra Zamojska) were the women who express their torturous conflicts within the relationship through these arias.

The Wiener Akademie Baroque Orchestra, conducted by Haselböck, was placed upstage behind a simple set consisting of a table, a glass of water and a stack of Unterweger's newly printed book, "The Infernal Comedy." The overture to Gluck's "Don Juan" set the tone for the kind of turbulent mindset that Unterweger was about to reveal to us: The violins spit out a frenetic mental chaos, and horns blasted an insistent and strident call to action. Via the particular affectations of Baroque and post-Baroque music written for staged drama, the arias represented the embodiment of emotion, ostensibly the woman's, but in truth, they were also Unterweger's inner voices of his primal guilt.

## **'I finally get to play a bad, bad guy'**

Malkovich, speaking in American English but telling us he had an Austrian accent (I couldn't detect it, except for a few oddly pronounced words here and there) took center stage as Unterweger, who gave us one psychological clue after another as to why he did what he did. Malkovich wrote in the program, "Here I finally get the possibility to play a bad, bad guy, which I really like." His monologue was delivered to the audience, but occasionally he tried to enter into a dialogue with them: "Can I ask you a personal question?" to a lady in the front row.

Malkovich/Unterweger went on to talk about art, fame, sex, honesty, his mother and the stone-cold ethics of his publisher (“They don’t care if I kill 100 women, they only care if I sell books”) between the plangent arias.

And the heartache of each singer’s text, the music of which often took them into stratospheric delirium, only needled him further into murdering them. While they were singing, he would bother them, seduce them, knock them down to the floor, then drag them around like animals on a leash. Bobro, a splendid singer with a radiant voice and effortless projection, sang a gorgeously dreamy aria about waiting for him and together they would sail upon the waves into eternity. His next move was to strangle her, for the second time. Or, was she singing while actually dead? He simply couldn’t kill her haunting voice.

### **Is there an aria for hubris?**

Yes, he was a “bad, bad guy,” having committed so many hideous crimes against women; however, this story has a less delineated subplot: women who obsessively attach themselves to bad boys. “Heavens!” screams the diva, “I am outraged, yet he is my heart, my hope.” Unterweger explains: “Women saw me as a social cause -- they wanted to rescue me, to believe that I could be transformed into someone with a soul. The first thing I learned to do in life was to smile, and that was already a lie.” As soulless as he painted himself in the context of relationships, his real hubris was narcissism. “My omnipotence gives me permission to kill and not get caught,” he says with total impunity. “I want to be someone, and I’d rather be a murderer than no one at all.”

Unterweger’s smoldering anger couched in provocative language is sure to arouse many different cultural responses as this show travels from one country to another. Malkovich’s choice of operative personalities was a Hollywood style of insolence seen in so many cinematic criminals and his use of American slang: Well, I’m wondering how that translated across some borders. Referring to answering the burning question as to whether he would tell the truth about murdering so many women, his final blithe response was, “You’ll have to follow me to Hamburg tomorrow night to see if I changed my mind.” Aria, please.

### **Brave singers**

The production was somewhat marred by the noisy air-conditioning and other electronics in the house, which covered up some highly nuanced (and un-miked) singing. The performances were riveting, the music exquisite and Malkovich/Unterweger, as the magnetic center of his own universe, was appropriately full of hissing contempt and moral putrefaction. The amazing singers who were willing to have themselves thrown around the stage as tools of his arrogant and brutal egocentricity deserve an extra round of applause.

18.05.2010

Arts & Culture

ALEXANDRA IVANOFF