WALES ARTS review

HALLOWEEN SPECIAL: SOUND AFFAIRS' THE FALL OF THE HOUSE OF USHER

Weston Studio, Wales Millennium Centre, Cardiff, Oct 23 2014
Sound Affairs presents:
The Fall of the House of Usher
Silent film directed by Jean Epstein 1928
New music score composed by Charlie Barber 2014

Despite decades of 18-rated ghoul-fests and psychotic killer-rampages, Jean Epstein's 1928 silent film, *The Fall of the House of Usher*, still oozes sublime gothic horror. With dreamlike black and white imagery, the film evokes the morbid shadows and suffocating eeriness of Edgar Allan Poe's classic short story, written nearly a hundred years before. Indeed, Epstein's film is a classic in its own right. Both works are unnerving masterpieces of their genre, with Poe and his adaptor in turn highly influential across the arts (also, as it happens, as arts theorists and critics). Clear traces of *Usher*, both explicit and lurking in the background, are visible in artforms as diverse as heavy metal

and opera, CGI and surrealist painting, horrorcore rap and symbolist poetry, rendering divisions between so-called 'low-brow' and 'high-brow' culture not just artificial but absurd.

Sound Affairs artistic director and composer Charlie Barber has long been fascinated by silent film and the expressive potential of screening it alongside specially-written music, performed live. Please note: that is 'screened alongside', not 'accompanied by' live music, for Barber is keen to create a 'synergy' of the two artforms in 'juxtaposition' (to paraphrase his programme note). He calls the result 'live cinema'. And a very potent and thrilling experience it is too in his hands; not to be mistaken for a similar-sounding but very different, pseudo kind of artform the big opera houses are now pushing with their live-streamed cinema.

The contrast is worth noting. In watching streamed (or even recorded) live opera, the experience is passive. We hear the music, watch the singers and follow the plot, but the director shows us what he or she wants us to see; our eyes are not free to roam across the set (nor can we smell the facepaint). The focus is inevitably on the principals, whose voices are carefully mixed by sound engineers to ensure we hear them clearly regardless of the balance onstage. Of course, the most successful live-relay can be effective and moving in its way. But it remains an essentially voyeuristic experience; watching what another audience is watching in a simulacrum of the real thing.*

In Barber's beautifully evoked *Usher*, however, as in his previous 'live cinema' production, the brilliant and vivid *Salomé* (with Charles Bryant's 1923 film adaptation of the Oscar Wilde play), the audience remains a full participant. We have the glorious experience of something actually created for the screen rather than a 'filmed event', and, at the same time, we watch and listen to live musicians performing a score created in scintillating response. Hence the music forms an 'alive' aural juxtaposition to the 'unchangeable' celluloid visuals, to borrow further Barber's words. Clearly, he is re-working the historic practice of live accompaniment to silent film. But I think where Barber most succeeds is in creating a space where the historic and the contemporary genuinely co-exist. And Epstein himself, in a sense, had already gone back in time, to bring his own, highly impressionistic imagination to bear on a long-existing, well-known tale.

Wisely, Barber sticks to instruments rather than voices, maintaining musically as it were the film's lack of dialogue or vocal sound. In *Salomé*, his ensemble comprises four percussionists, placed with great dramatic flair on scaffolding around the big screen. In *Usher*, the score is for a chamber orchestra of sixteen players; all highly gifted young professionals who clearly enjoy Barber's luscious orchestration – and there is some exquisite writing, especially for brass and woodwind. Arranged in two groups in front and either side of the

screen, the effect is different from, say, an onstage music-theatre large ensemble; not least because the orchestra is unconducted, yet performs with fantastic rhythmic precision.

Of course each player is guided by a click track through an ear-piece. Yet there was no loss of elasticity in the texture or phrasing, nor any loss of interaction or involvement, as if some ghostly, unseen conductor was drawing the strands of sound together. In this performance, a quiet but audible click emanated from the brass for part of the evening, which I found a tad irritating, though others didn't seem to notice it. Dry ice floated across the blue-black space, gently curling around a screen which was semi-contained within a broken picture frame; just like the portrait of Madeline which Usher slowly paints into life as she herself fades away from frame to frame within the film (in a Wildeian twist, Epstein borrows elements here from a further Poe short story: *The Oval Portrait*).

The starting point of Barber's score is Debussy's unfinished Poe opera *La chute de la maison Usher,* so the music itself weaves the historic with the contemporary – and in wonderfully suggestive fashion. Taking four motifs from Debussy's sketches, Barber reworks them into a completely new, highly evocative score that is full of sinuous colour, subtly paced to match the film's waxing and waning terror and unrelenting dark psychosis. The soundworld is distinctly Barber's own, notwithstanding the recognisable Debussy which winds subtly through and around in places, often misty or far away. The opening oboe theme recurs, for instance, straining tritone over washes of shimmering, extended harmonies and whole tone scales. But there is an entirely different pulse to this score overall; an insistence that is more Reich than rolling Debussy, elegant and restrained, yet ritually expressive of the unfolding tragedy.

Much to assistant director Luis Buñuel's dismay (he walked off the set), Epstein makes Madeline the wife rather than the sister of Roderick Usher, as in the original story. This gives the film a more straightforward – if still tortured and demented – romantic glimmer than the black abyss of Poe's incestuous vision. But Barber does not slavishly follow Epstein's emotional template; often his music builds to a climax which then suddenly tails off, say, with a switch of camera angle or sudden gust of leaf-strewn wind, only to rebuild once again in more direct tandem with the action… of which there is, in fact, very little in a conventional sense, since this film, and Barber's music too, are really all about thick, but finely drawn, claustrophobic layerings of atmosphere and anxiety, which build to a stormy, melodramatic crescendo as the house implodes.

In the Poe original, the ending is grimly final as brother and sister are swallowed by the 'weeping stones' of their ancestral castle. In Epstein's film,

Madeline survives her live internment by the evil doctor just in time to stagger, wraith-like in her bridal-burial veil, back to the house and wrest her mad husband from its clutches. Fires rise up to consume her portrait and with it, we might imagine, Usher's haunted obsession; cast as a deranged painter in the film to Poe's sickly synaesthete. But as we watch the pair reach an apparently safe distance, and the vengeful house collapses into the swamp, Barber brings it all chillingly to a close on a minor chord as ambiguous as the surrounding thickets remain desolate, and full of creatures of ill omen. Very neatly done.

Steph Power