

From dystopias to a feel-good opera

After a bleak adaptation of 'The Handmaid's Tale,' Poul Ruders lightens up

BY ALLAN KOZINN

"My maternal grandfather, who was a humble gardener, loved Verdi and Puccini," the Danish composer Poul Ruders recalled recently. "And when I was 10 or 11, he took me first to see 'La Bohème,' and then to see 'Aida.'"

"But the experience," he added, "did not turn me into an opera freak. I only know a few operas — perhaps four or five."

He was being either modest or mischievous: Mr. Ruders has by now composed five operas of his own. As he spoke, seated alongside Becky and David Starobin — the librettists of his most recent opera, "The Thirteenth Child" — in a Boston hotel room in May, Mr. Ruders, 70, was awaiting the opening of Boston Lyric Opera's starkly powerful new production of "The Handmaid's Tale"



RAMSAY DE GIVE FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

Putting the finishing touches on a staircase for the world premiere of "The Thirteenth Child," a new work by the composer Poul Ruders, at Santa Fe Opera in New Mexico.

(2000), his second and most acclaimed work for the stage.

He would leave shortly afterward for New Mexico, where Santa Fe Opera gave the world premiere of "The Thirteenth Child" on Saturday. (It runs through Aug. 21.)

"The Thirteenth Child" is an unusual entry in Mr. Ruders's acidic, politically charged operatic portfolio. Based on a lesser-known Grimms' fairy tale, it presents a battle between good and evil, with good triumphing, though not without cost — a first for Mr. Ruders, whose earlier operas are more pessimistic.

Oddly for opera, which revolves around commissions, Mr. Ruders undertook the work with no idea what company might stage it. And it was recorded before any house had even had a look at the score.

These departures have to do with the Starobins, first-time librettists who are better known for running Bridge Records, a respected label that focuses on new music. (Mr. Starobin is also a renowned guitarist, with specialties in

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contemporary and early-19th-century repertoire.) The couple met Mr. Ruders at the Tanglewood Festival of Contemporary Music in 1986 and became fast friends with the composer after being impressed by a performance of his "Manhattan Abstraction."

"Here was this Danish guy," Mr. Starobin recalled, "who's figured out how to describe New York City in music. There's atonal stuff, there's tonal stuff, and they're butting up against each other — there's a tension between the two."

Mr. Starobin commissioned a few guitar works from Mr. Ruders, and started a series devoted to the composer; the recording of "The Thirteenth Child," released in June, was the 11th installment. In 1988, Ms. Starobin became Mr. Ruders's manager, which involves arranging commissions (including his third and fourth symphonies) and suggesting, in 2013, that it was time to think about a new stage work.

"We had worked out a lot of plans together," Ms. Starobin said, "and it just felt to me that it was time for Poul to write another opera. But I thought that he should write something very different from what he had written in the past."

Until then, Mr. Ruders's operas had been focused mostly on tragic historical figures or dystopian fiction. His first, "Tycho" (1986), is about Tycho Brahe, the 16th-century Danish astronomer who, despite his notable discoveries, spent his final years in exile and lived to see some of his theories upended by his assistant, Johannes Kepler. Though the score remains available from his publisher, it has not been recorded, and Mr. Ruders has all but disowned it.

"It bombed and disappeared without a trace," said Mr. Ruders, who noted that he was working with an inexperienced librettist. "I was not exactly young — I was 36 — but I'd never written an opera before."

"The Handmaid's Tale," which brought the grim world of Margaret Atwood's novel to the opera stage — without, as Ms. Atwood initially feared, turning the handmaids into a high-kicking chorus line — was more successful, as was its successor, "Kafka's Trial" (2005), which mixes incidents from Kafka's life with parts of his posthumous novel, "The Trial." A mixed response greeted "Selma Jezkova" (2007), the tragic story of a desperate mother who is tried and hanged for murder, inspired by the Lars von Trier film "Dancer in the Dark."

These are fierce works, about struggle rather than hope, and they focus on principal characters who are at odds with those around them and with the world. And, for the most part, these operas are etched in a searing chromatic language that suits their wrenching emotions.

"The Thirteenth Child" does have its forbidding moments. The first act revolves around the paranoid King Hjarne and his greedy cousin Drokan — the regent of the neighboring kingdom, who covets both Hjarne's land and his queen, Gertrude, and whose Iago-like insinuations turn Hjarne against his 12 sons. Some angular vocal writing and cluster-

rich orchestration were inevitable.

But, although Hjarne and Drokan create the plot's conflicts, it is Gertrude who provides the human core, sending her sons into exile before Hjarne can have them killed, and later sending her daughter, Lyra — the 13th child of the title — on a quest to find them. Along the way, there is a mishap involving fantastical lilies and ravens, and a magical solution to it that requires Lyra to remain silent for seven years. Gertrude, Lyra and Frederic — Drokan's selfless heir, who falls in love with Lyra — are responsible for the increasingly lyrical music as the story advances.

"A wall-to-wall atonal piece can be fantastic," Mr. Ruders said. "But if you want a foreground and background, mentally and audibly, you need this juxtaposition between tonality and chromaticism, because that's where you get the space."

It was Mr. Ruders who chose "The 12 Brothers," the story on which the opera is based. He sent an outline to Ms. Starobin, who began writing the libretto on her own. Mr. Starobin at first had no intention of collaborating with them. But he did have suggestions, and after a few months of batting around ideas, they realized that they were collaborating after all. Along the way, the Starobins reconfigured the Grimms' story, adding the villainous Drokan and deleting an evil second queen, Frederic's mother.

"There was a really strong pull," Ms. Starobin said, "to make this about family, and how families can strengthen each other or rip each other apart."

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In working with the Starobins, Mr. Ruders violated the rule he established in the aftermath of "Tycho": that his librettists be theater professionals. But Mr. Starobin had long ago gotten a practical education in musical theater from his brother, Michael Starobin, a composer and busy orchestrator for theater, film and television.

Still, there remained the question of where the work would be staged. The Starobins planned from the start to record it, using the Odense Symphony Orchestra in Denmark. (Mr. Ruders lives in Odense, a city of 180,000 southwest of Copenhagen.) Originally, the orchestra was to present the work's premiere. But all concerned agreed that a premiere at an opera house would be preferable, so copies of the score and a rough mix of the orchestral recording — the singers were recorded later — made the rounds.

As it happened, Santa Fe Opera was searching for a new work for its 2019 summer season, and a finished but unheard opera by Mr. Ruders fit the bill. The company and the Odense orchestra worked out an arrangement: The opera house would present the premiere and then ship the physical production — directed by Darko Tresnjak, with sets by Alexander Dodge and costumes by Rita Ryack — to Denmark, where the orchestra will perform it in 2021.



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The director Darko Tresnjak and the soprano Jessica E. Jones, who plays Lyra, during rehearsal for "The Thirteenth Child" at Santa Fe Opera.