

Thorsten Palzhoff

Greuther's Orpheus

The bed, an enormous four-poster, takes up the whole of the middle of the stage. On either side of it some twenty or so actors wait in silence for the beginning. They are tired from standing so long; they are either leaning with their elbows against the set-like walls of the magnificent chamber or are sitting with affected indifference on one of the chairs standing around at the corners of the stage. The wizards from the prop department have had the idea of dressing them all up in historical costumes made of black velvet and brocade. Despite the powder and make-up, their faces are red, and at this moment somewhere in the audience someone whispers excitedly to the person sitting next to him that the red blotches on the men's foreheads and cheeks have not been caused solely by the heat of the spotlights, in whose beams floats the dust of centuries, but more than anything else by the expectation of an imminent death. His neighbour nods meaningfully, but in the tense silence of this beginning and with so many microphones and cameras around he dare not utter a syllable, answering instead by tapping the man on his wrist and now, in his turn, with a silent gesture drawing his attention to a red cardinal's robe that has appeared at the back of the stage behind all the black-costumed men. Unnoticed by the audience, but caught by the camera zoom in an image that comes up on the stage manager's monitor, the cardinal plucks at the left sleeve of his robe and casts a furtive glance at his watch. Satisfied, he looks up again, nods at those around him and raises his right hand. Almost at that very instant movement comes into the hitherto so quiet scene. The loud creaking of heavy wood can be heard and, believing it to

come from the four-poster bed, the bystanders start to whisper, pressing closer to the bed and beginning almost imperceptibly to sway, for under their feet the stage is turning clockwise and only comes to a halt when the foot of the bed points towards the now murmuring and clapping spectators. They can now look straight into the face of the dying man, who lies deeply buried in the pillows of the enormous four-poster. His face is pale, damp with sweat and puffy with the weariness and tedium that the dying man has begun to feel in the face of death. Unkempt strands of black hair stick to his forehead, his beard is scraggly and matted, and his eyes are as empty as they had always been – except on the occasions when they burned with naked anger or the passion of love-making. He is going to die, very soon in fact, for the script has him in the role of Vincenzo Gonzaga, the Duke of Mantua, and today, the 18th of February in the year 1612, is the day of his death.

Freed from having to determine which past they were dealing with here, and also from the confusion caused by the lack of an opening curtain and a clear beginning, the audience wildly applaud what they presume is the real beginning of the performance. Sitting in the left-hand box, the stage director uses the general commotion to point to the ascetic gaunt man who is sitting ensconced in his seat in the box opposite and is looking down darkly on what is happening on stage. His head leaning to one side, the director whispers to the person next to him: look, there he is, that's Morowski. He knows as well as I do that this apparently so sophisticated staging of stillness and noise, emptiness and history is basically nothing but a trick, for Greuther's Orpheus has no beginning. The old theatre, the dusty stage, the costumed actors and the presence of an audience – all this diverts attention away from what Greuther's Orpheus actually

is: just a tangled mass of sketches, notes and composition drafts which Greuther's biographer Blohm had discovered in the composer's estate. The three small boxes labelled 'Orpheus' came into Morowski's possession by unknown paths, and in two years of obsessive work he filled in the gaps and patched together a version fit for the stage, which was being performed today for the first time. Morowski had in fact immersed himself so deeply in the composer's world of sounds and imagination that one morning, awaking out of troubled dreams, the sketched figures from his dreams appeared before his eyes complete with stage and audience as clearly as if they were as real as he himself. First came the dying figure of Vincenzo Gonzaga, Duke of Mantua, lying on an enormous bed; he is surrounded by twenty courtiers, drawn there by the Duke's imminent death. They are tired from standing around so long and from the stuffy air; they have been forbidden to open a window on pain of severe punishment. Standing devoutly with his hands folded in front of his stomach at the right-hand end of the bed is the Cardinal. He bends down to Vincenzo and whispers something to him, softly but piercingly sharp. Morowski does not understand what the Cardinal has said but he knows from Greuther's notes that he is urging the Duke to repent, to show remorse for his debauched life. There is no answer, but from the distance, from somewhere backstage or beyond the stage breaks forth a long, terrible cry that nobody can hear except Vincenzo in his bed, his enormous deathbed, the site of numerous tortures, vices and troubled dreams. The bystanders push closer to the bed and observe every movement in Vincenzo's suddenly pain-distorted face. He averts his face from the spectators, turns with a sigh to the left and stares now into the corner of his chamber. Again he hears the cry. He presses a hand to his

left ear, while his right ear is buried in the pillow. And in his shivering fit he thinks he can see himself there in the corner lying on his bed next to his first wife, Margherita Farnese, whom he tried for many years to get with child. She was only fourteen when Vincenzo married her, and on account of a handicap, a narrowing of the pelvis, was unsuitable for physical love. The cries she uttered into his ear during the tortured act of love could be heard throughout the palace and were the occasion for gossip that accompanied him everywhere he went. He sees her there in the corner of the stage only as a shadow, but he can hear all the more clearly her incessant cries, the cries he used to flee from. While Margherita had to submit herself to numerous fertility tests, during which she was forced to lie on a narrow bed with her legs apart surrounded by twenty men, and while the men felt her pelvis, her pubic bone and her vagina, and deliberated whether to carry out a surgical operation that would have meant her death, Vincenzo rode, Margherita's cries in his ears, to Ferrara to abandon himself to one of Countess Torelli's orgies, orgies which were widely famous for their originality. This weeklong debauchery had been arranged for him by his mistress Barbara, with whom, even after his marriage, he had stayed in letter contact via a female dwarf from Mantua whom Barbara had persuaded to take on the role of courier. Vincenzo Gonzaga, Duke of Mantua, sees all this in the corner of the stage in the form of ghostly flickering images, and, to their astonishment, the bystanders, who are suffering under the heat of the floodlights, notice that Vincenzo's feverish body is shuddering, the Duke first whining softly and then suddenly laughing, a sign of madness or the devil. But all that has happened is that he has seen Barbara's dwarf there in the corner and thought back to a wicked deed he had dreamt up one morning lying

in bed when he was awoken by her. His own father, Guglielmo, whom he bitterly hated, was a misshapen hunchback, and once, in order to humiliate him, Vincenzo had had his splendid theatre group perform a play in his presence in the Palazzo Ducale in which all the actors were hunchbacked. At the end of the play, Guglielmo accepted the farce with the hunchbacks behind a mask of politeness. However, to avenge his honour and to conquer his anger he had had all the actors banned from Mantua under threat of torture and death. Vincenzo laughed at the cries of his crippled father and ran, heady with hate and wine, from the young men and ladies in the audience, into his chamber, where he set about Margherita, who thought she would die of pain under her husband's virile lust. She cried out with all her might, and even now, after so many years, Vincenzo still hears the late echo of her screams. He turns in his bed towards the spectators and opens his mouth, as if he wanted to say something. Out of his throat, however, caught by the boom microphone, comes only a terrible rattle. He waves the Cardinal over to him, and when he leans over him, whispers something in his ear. Over the loudspeakers the spellbound audience hears the Duke murmur but, despite the sensitive technology, what he says to the Cardinal is impossible for Morowski to understand or work out from Greuther's estate. But Vincenzo's face betrays to the audience his desire for music – a thrusting wish in a life full of voraciousness and avidity.

Lying in bed, buried under a mound of papers from Greuther's estate, Morowski, between waking and dream, observes Vincenzo's eyes as they sternly and imperiously follow the entrance of the musicians.

Accompanied by the applause of the audience, one last figure enters the room: his long black regalia has often been repaired and now once again

its seams have come apart. He holds in his left hand a viola and in his right a bow. It is Monteverdi. His gait is shuffling and laboured from his undying grief, grief for his wife Claudia, which gnaws at him today as much as it did at her death four and a half years ago. Sick to the point of death at her irrevocable passing and the excessive burden of the work imposed on him, he fled from Vincenzo's employ to his father's house in Cremona and stayed there for many weeks, lying in bed as if on a drifting boat of searing grief. And while he lay there sick with love for a dead person, he constantly heard the lament of his Orfeo, which he had performed for the first time in the Palazzo Ducale shortly before. It was as if he were hearing a portent of his own pain in Orfeo's lamentations for the death of Eurydice, his *Ohi mè che odo? Ohi mè!*, followed by nothing, only silence, only a pause, the absence of all music. But Vincenzo showed no consideration for this condition: he tore him from his death bed and ordered him to return immediately to Mantua to satisfy his desire for ever newer, ever more unrestrained music. He was supposed to compose a ballet, a new opera for the wedding of Gonzaga's eldest son Francesco as quickly as possible, to be ready for carnival. Ah! ... despite his grief, his exhaustion and the shortness of the time allotted to him music poured out of Monteverdi like a pure lament. And then, at the performance of his sad work, the opera Arianna, whose lamentations shook the audience to tears, it happened that Monteverdi, now at the end of his strength, saw his Claudia in a corner of the room. At that moment her form darkened to a shadow. Trembling over his whole body, he ordered the singer Caterina Marinelli to sing with great passion and deep emotion, in the mad hope his music might dissolve Claudia's shadow. Ah! ... despite the deathly beauty of Caterina's singing, which all around brought every bow on every

string and every hand on every instrument to rest, and the musicians to fall silent in the middle of a movement, Claudia's shadow remained. Even now, at the premiere of Greuther's Orpheus the shadow is present – only nobody notices it apart from Monteverdi. He sees Claudia's face next to the stage as dark and silent as when, on orders from Vincenzo, they had had to separate a few days after their wedding at the height of their happiness because the Duke could not do without having his musicians around him at all times – even when he travelled to take the waters, passing through Basel and Nancy on his way to the baths of Spa. Bloated, Vincenzo lay in the waters of Spa and, after driving away all the courtesans and knaves in a fit of sudden anger, he summoned his musicians. Then, lying in the water with his eyes closed, he listened to them until the candles had all gone out and it had become completely dark. Even on his campaigns in Turkey, which Vincenzo, inspired by Tasso's crusade epic and in the teeth of all political reality, staged as a holy war against the Muslim heathens, even on these theatrical campaigns Vincenzo Gonzaga surrounded himself with a company of musicians. Now, in the hour of his death, he remembers, as in a dream, his third march – a journey into rain, cold and mud. He had been stranded outside the Hungarian fortress of Kanisza with an injured knee in the autumnal marshes of southern Hungary and there he listened to the rain drumming on the roof of his tent. He lay on a soaking wet mattress, and while his musicians sang madrigals of love and war in the glow of a hundred candles, he dictated, feverish from the vapours of the marshes, a letter to his group of court alchemists, urging them to manufacture a cannonball full of poisonous gas. When he had finished the letter and was able to give himself up completely to the music, he lay on his damp

mattress thinking of his bed, his four-poster, and he was happy to know that it was so far away. He found it extraordinary that he had become the object of gossip throughout the courts of Italy because, after two years of marriage to Margherita Farnese, no offspring had been conceived. Margherita's brother Ranuccio, deeply hurt in his family pride, accused Vincenzo of being an adulterer and a sodomite, an impotent syphilitic fool whose sword was too short. The scandal even reached the Pope, who, when the Gonzagas considered divorce whilst keeping the dowry, sent Cardinal Borromeo to Mantua to look into the matter. While Vincenzo, on the Cardinal's orders, was being subjected to numerous medical tests of his virility – which also involved lying in a bed in Venice surrounded by about twenty men before whose eyes he had to satisfy a Florentine virgin by the name of Julia – and while the men groped his genitals before his first attempt and the doctor Belisario Vinta informed him about his right to push his hand between the two sets of buttocks and to feel whether the sword was in the sheath, Guglielmo, Vincenzo's humpbacked father, was riding to Florence to the court of the Medici in search of a more suitable bride for his son. He brought him Eleonora, who had grown up at the court of the Grand Duchess Bianca Capello, a Venetian courtesan and magician who had introduced Satanic practices to Florence. But every time Eleonora de' Medici gave herself up to Vincenzo, what he heard were not her lustful shudderings but rather Margherita's screams, and late in the night he called his musicians to the chamber, where he had them gather around his bed or behind the scenes to drive out the noise of the past with music. Morowski watches as they enter the room on Vincenzo's orders. The chamber becomes hotter and stuffier from the crush and movement of so many people, and as he finally glimpses Monteverdi, he

curse the composer's costume with its sleeves of lace and its snowwhite collars. At the rehearsals Morowski had pointed out to the director that the accuracy of the costumes had nothing to do with the historical reality of a society characterised by dirt, stench and leprosy. But the director showed not the slightest interest in this objection and just murmured that now that Morowski had done his part of the work on Greuther's Orpheus, he, Palzhoff, could begin with his work, for which ultimately he alone had to take responsibility before his clients in Mantua. And as Morowski himself probably knew best after the work he had had to do on the chaos left behind by Greuther, the performance was basically the performance of a work that did not exist. But that is nonsense, Morowski thinks now, for how could something not exist that I am experiencing at this moment? How can something that stirs passions in the spectator have no reality? His eyes closed, he listens to the applause with which the audience greets the beginning of the performance. Excited, they crane their necks towards Vincenzo Gonzaga, whom they can now look straight in the face. He lifts his head with difficulty, waves the Cardinal over to him and whispers something in his ear. And now that it is once again absolutely quiet on stage and the pale Vincenzo has closed his shadow-ringed eyes, Monteverdi steps up to the bed. Filled with hatred, he looks into Vincenzo's face, filled with hatred, he bends his head and lifts his bow to strike up the music that will stir the Duke to death. And now out of the quiet distance, from somewhere beside the stage or out of some hidden loudspeaker, breaks through the first articulated sound, a cello tone that swells up out of nothing; a violin starts up with a phrase that is immediately taken up by a second violin a half-tone lower, and then a third and a fourth violin draw out the downward echo, and there is hardly

anyone in the audience who realises that this tone cloud descending upon them quotes a phrase from Monteverdi's Orfeo. In the right-hand box, completely ensconced in his seat and with his eyes closed, sits an ascetic gaunt man in the midst of the swelling turmoil. It is Morowski, who has a thorough knowledge of Greuther's music and knows that at its heart it contains Orpheus's lament about Eurydice's death: *Ohi mè che odo? Ohi mè!* And far above it all two violas begin to converse in bright, strangely lifeless flageolet-like tones out of which he hears the prologue to Orfeo: *I am the music that soothes the confused heart with sweet tones. When I sing, everything should be silent.* Then all at once everything falls silent; only in Vincenzo Gonzaga, the Duke of Mantua, does an echo of long forgotten times linger: *clamore – amore – more ...*