

ALEXANDER TANSMAN

SEXTUOR

L'USIGNOLO DI BOBOLI

SEXTUOR (1923)

Ever since his early childhood, Tansman was fascinated by the stage. Enough to recall his music composed for Aristophanes' *Lysistrata* performed at the Polski Theatre in Lodz in 1916.

After his first success in Paris and across the world, Tansman took up one of Alexandre Arnoux's novellas, *Sextuor*: a dramatic story of love of a violin and a cello for a flute. He deemed it a perfect libretto for a ballet.

At night, in an empty music salon, a group of instruments are lying in their cases: a flute, a violin and a cello grouped together; a bit further, a trombone; standing are a piano and a big drum. Asleep, a tuning fork sighs in continuous *la*.

The flute, bearing a vibrant name of Armance, rises slowly and approaches the violin. The lid of the case lifts up cautiously, revealing the instrument: Marquis de Santa Lucia. The spirit of the piano shivers, the lid of the cello's case opens up to let the bow out, the trombone gets a hiccup, while the drum indulges in sombre complaints. Armance continues its dancing invocation.

Suddenly, Santa Lucia (the violin) emerges from its grave and begins an unabashed dance around the flute. The dignified and passionate cello also appears on stage. The Neapolitan violin initiates a very Italian serenade, divulging its feelings: passion, ecstasy and ravishment.

Herzsturm (cello) cannot stand it. It interrupts the serenade with low sounds of the prelude which reveals the profoundness of its soul. Santa Lucia's abusing laughter does not however permit any further confessions. Armance, a cold-blooded coquette, encourages the suitors to continue.

Dom Allargando (trombone) and Bouldoul (drum) interfere with learned sayings about ardent feelings.

A hasty dialogue of the violin and the cello follows. The cello slaps the rival's face. Dom Allargando intervenes, observing the matters of honour: the libel, the blood, the lady's presence all incite to an honorary duel.

The suitors salute Armance and prepare to fight with bows. The energetic slugger

– the violin – keeps attacking the cello shielded only by pure love. Armance's voice presides over the sounds of the duel.

Dom Allargando supervises the correct proceedings of the duel. Herzsturm doesn't like the cunning Neapolitan shoves. The fight commences in fourths and sixths, followed by the parade of an octave and a seventh: the adversaries obey the rules of fencing and counterpoint. The whole duel takes a form of a regular sonata.

The cello falls out of guard and exposes itself. Santa Lucia uses the moment in a swift tempo recalling the demonic Paganini. Deadly wounded, Herzsturm collapses. In its last words, it makes an offering of its life to Armance.

Funeral march. Heavenly flourish. Paradise. Choir of cherubs.

Heavy sighs followed by the change of tone.

Wedding march. Loyalty. Offspring. Wedding procession. Allargando. Tutti quanti. Maestoso. Pomposo.

The procession with Armance and Santa Lucia slowly treads the carpet. The spirit of the piano peals the bells, the tuning fork emits its last *la*, the only sound it is capable of. The curtain.

Composed in 1923 for symphonic orchestra, and instrumentalised with taste and clarity, Tansman's piece did not illustrate the libretto with its psychological or physical tensions. Instead, it offered a correlative of the protagonists' emotions: the 'angelic purity' of the flute, or the 'solemn sentimentalism' of the cello. The fantastic or burlesque qualities of this tragicomedy which Tansman called a 'ballet bouffe' were rendered by strictly musical means in an ideal symbiosis with the orchestra. The dramatic and musical action happens side by side. The piece was devised as an autonomic 'commentary' on the text, with its own independent dramaturgy. At that time, such a solution was a novelty: many an artist followed that path later, while Tansman kept to it in his subsequent compositions for stage.

Sextuor was premiered in Paris in 1924, with choreography of Olga Preobrazenska, conducted by the composer; in 1926 in Chicago, with choreography of the famous choreographer-dancer Adolf Bolm; and at the Metropolitan Opera in New York in 1927, conducted by Maria Callas' favourite conductor, the great Tullio Serafin. The American title was changed into *Tragedy of the Cello*. The ballet achieved international success, moving to Berlin in 1930, where it was conducted by Erich Kleiber under the title of *Silvesterpuck*.