

Kleist

An opera in 5 acts by Rainer Rubbert
with libretto by Tanja Langer

The most beautiful refrain to death is life.

Kleist, a tragi-comic opera, was commissioned by the State of Brandenburg in association with the three principal theaters of the region: Brandenburg-on-the-Havel, Frankfurt-on-the-Oder and Potsdam. The premiere is planned for Saturday, the 22nd of March 2008, at the Brandenburg City Theater. The work will then be presented in Potsdam, Frankfurt-on-the-Oder and Berlin.

The opera tells the story of the life, work and death of the poet, Heinrich von Kleist. He was born in Frankfurt-on-the-Oder in 1777, and his life was marked by the wars of Revolution and Empire that shook Prussia in this era. Following a brief military career, he dedicated himself to a life of letters. He became known for his directness of manner and the free expression that he always gave his feelings. While this often made him cut an awkward figure in society, the brilliance and originality of his work won him a following. He transformed the people in the milieus that he frequented – the military and the *jeunesse dorée* of the Romantic era – in writings that were both highly imaginative and also very clear sighted about the political consequences of the French Revolution and even the situation in Europe's foreign colonies. This intensely felt life ended when he committed double suicide in November 1811, at the age of only 34, on the banks of the Wannsee with Henriette Vogel, the companion of his last days.

Rainer Rubbert's opera goes beyond telling the story of Kleist's life through scenes based on the facts of his biography. It also recreates the inner life of the poet through fantastic scenes where creatures from Kleist's work (Penthesilea, Arminius, young Kathy of Heilbronn, the four iconoclasts from *Saint Cecilia* or the Marquise of O-) mingle with the poets' real life friends (Ernst von Pfuel, his companion in arms, the poet Karoline von Günderode, Bettina von Arnim and Clemens von Brentano) and historical personages outside his circle. For example, Napoleon, conqueror of Prussia, takes the scene at the end of the second act, while in the fourth act a former slave from St. Domingue (Haïti) keeps Kleist company while he is imprisoned in the Fort de Joux during the war between France and Prussia. The line between biographical reality and poetic fiction is blurred even further by having the same singers play the historical personages and the imaginary ones.

The opera's music is a modern reworking of the German Romantic tradition. Incorporating influences from *Wozzeck* and contemporary *Klangfarbenmusik*, the composer creates an avant garde musical language which is rigorous and graceful at the same time. The instrumentation adds a generous percussion section and a prepared piano to a classical symphony orchestra. The vocal compositions will surely set a new standard for contemporary "bel canto".

The composer, Rainer Rubbert, lives and works in Berlin (www.rainer-rubbert.de). His musical activities include acting as founding director of *Unerhörte Musik* (« Unheard (of) Music »), a weekly concert series for contemporary music in Berlin: www.unerhoerte-musik.de.

The librettist, Tanja Langer, is a novelist who lives and works in Berlin. Her works have been published by « dtv » (*Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag*): www.tanjalanger.de

The performance of the opera takes approximately two and a half hours.

Characters:

Heinrich von Kleist (baritone)
Ernst von Pfuel, friend of Kleist (bass)
Ulrike, sister of Kleist / a prison guard (alto)
Wilhelmine (Minette), sister of Kleist (soprano)
Friederike, sister of Kleist / mother of the 4 iconoclasts (contralto)

The Marquise of O- / Henriette Vogel (mezzo-soprano)

First male salon goer (tenor)
Clemens von Brentano / Arminius (baritone)
Bettina von Arnim / Kathy of Heilbronn (coloratura soprano)
Karoline von Günderode / Penthesilea (contralto)
The black painter from St.-Domingue (bass)
Napoleon (tenor)
Four brothers / iconoclasts / terrorists (3 tenors, 1 baritone)
[Six nuns]

Act 1: Two who Love Each Other

The first act's centerpiece is a lakeshore meeting between Kleist and his companion at arms, Ernst von Pfuel, after a separation. The scene takes place in about 1804, when Prussia and France were still at peace. The two friends had lived together for a while in Paris, but Kleist suddenly left Paris without telling Pfuel in order to join the French army in their campaign against England. The meeting is an accident, although both had been looking for each other. Kleist longs for the friend that he abandoned, as he finds himself full of doubts, with no money or prospects. Pfuel reproaches himself for having left Kleist in need. They quarrel and then make up, while in the background imaginary figures from Kleist's work provide a counterpoint to the action.

Act 2: A Salon/Dance on the Volcano

The second act takes place in 1806 in the literary and social salon of Bettina von Arnim, in Berlin. Kleist arouses the curiosity of the habitués of the salon. They are both charmed and irritated by his eccentric behavior and by the recitation of the works which he is writing. We suddenly learn that war has been declared between France and Prussia. Pfuel leaves to rejoin the army, over Kleist's protests. The two friends are again separated. In despair, Kleist seeks consolation in the company of Karoline von Günderode, a suicidal poet who keeps a knife hidden in the folds of her dress. The two poets discuss art and death. The company is broken up when Napoleon enters the scene after defeating Prussia at Jena.

Act 3 (Intermezzo): Kleist commits himself

The third act presents a brief interlude when Kleist finds refuge in a sort of asylum where he can write in peace. The scene mixes other inhabitants of the asylum, including the mother of four iconoclasts, with figures from Kleist's imagination.

Intermission

Act 4: One writes

The fourth act, set in 1807, during the on-going war between France and Prussia, finds Kleist a prisoner of war in the Fort de Joux under the supervision of a formidable prison warden (Ulrike). Kleist's only companion during his captivity is a former Dominican slave, imprisoned following the uprising in Haïti. He paints a portrait of the poet, who writes constantly. Isolated from the world, Kleist fills his cell with figures his imagination has created from acquaintances in the Berlin salon of Bettina von Arnim: young Kathy of Heilbronn (Bettina von Arnim), Penthesilea (Günderode), the Marquise of O-. They converse with their creator, or argue and compete among themselves. The four iconoclasts are also there, in a separate cell. When peace is finally declared, Kleist and his companions are liberated.

Act 5: Die free!

The fifth and final act is set in the modern world. It begins in an industrial junk yard somewhere in Eastern Europe, where four terrorists are putting together a car bomb. In this wasteland a hellish din reigns, and Kleist sees his last illusions crumble one by one: he is devastated by the Prussian defeat, without material resources, abandoned by his friend Pfuel, misunderstood by the Dominican painter, rejected by his sisters. A violent explosion briefly interrupts this series of personal blows. The act's final scene shows a carefree picnic on the shore of Lake Wannsee. Kleist has finally found the kindred spirit who accepts to die with him. Henriette Vogel and the poet act out their planned double suicide.