

A haunting *Jakob Lenz* in Zurich

Von [Elodie Olson-Coons](#), 20 November 2022

https://bachtrack.com/de_DE/review-jakob-lenz-rihm-huber-debus-oper-zurich-november-2022

Wolfgang Rihm's 1979 opera [Jakob Lenz](#), inspired by the life of the 18th-century German poet, is getting a number of well-deserved revivals on the occasion of the composer's 70th birthday, including this ambitious collaboration between [Opernhaus Zürich](#) and the [Zürich Kammerorchester](#). This is something the composer seems to have mixed feelings about – "O Gott, es ist 45 Jahre her, dass ich das geschrieben habe" (Oh God, I wrote that 45 years ago) he exclaims in the interview featured in the programme notes – but his audiences and critics beg to differ.



Yannick Debus (Lenz) and the Six Voices

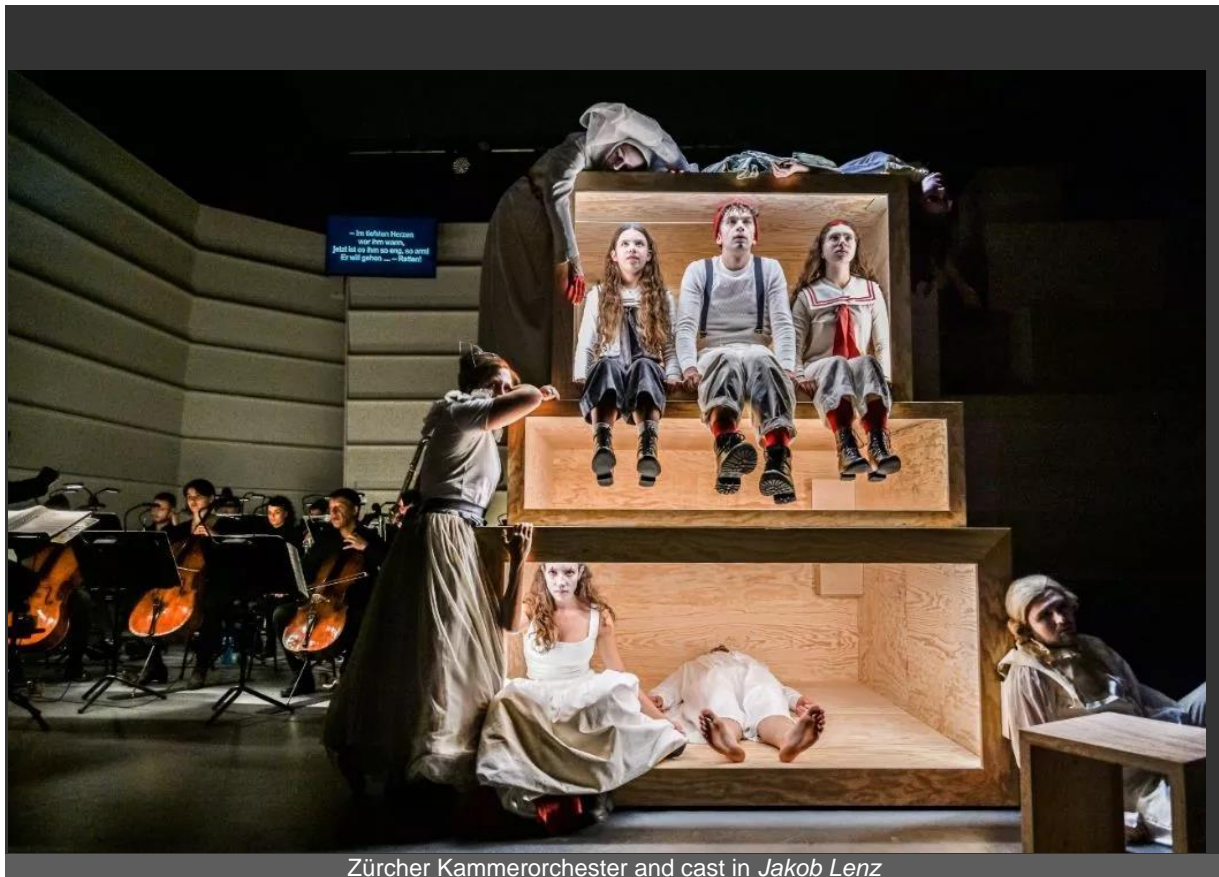
© Toni Suter

Rihm's writing has aged tremendously well. The playful orchestration, toying with older forms (the folksong, the motet), sometimes settling into moments of unexpected harmonic beauty, sometimes flirting with something closer to a satirical impulse (a two-note harpsichord trill that lasts for an entire vocal line), still feels unexpected and alive in the capable hands of the Zürcher Kammerorchester, both when it is stripped down to bare bones, and when it settles into a richer, more melancholy mode. The jarring clash of the anvil in the final section still has the power to make you flinch. In other words, there is obviously an enduring power to the work, whatever the setting.



Bozena Bujnicka, Freya Apffelstaedt, Simone McIntosh, Amin Ahangaran and Gregory Feldman
© Toni Suter

And the setting is a little odd: the ZKO's stage is small even for a chamber orchestra, crowded high with the now-ubiquitous modular wooden boxes, and at times the more explosive vocal sequences threatened to saturate the resonant acoustic. But Mélanie Huber's stripped-down production plays with these parameters and turns them into strengths. Take, for instance, Dino Strucken's lighting design, which floods the stage with white or golden light, projecting sharp shadows on the walls. Lena Hiebel's costumes are both subtle and striking, with strong details (a strange tulle wimple, a string of blood-red rosary beads) doing a lot of work, and clashing colours (the central trio of men decked out in crimson, orange-red and salmon-pink) working together to unsettling effect. Even the boxes are particularly well employed, transforming from a rough mountain landscape for Lenz-the-philosopher to a makeshift pulpit for Lenz-the-theologian, from a deep well for Lenz-the-suicidal to a kind of straightjacket-like box within which Lenz-the-madman is finally enclosed. They also provided interesting acoustics when the characters dare to sing from within those cramped spaces.



Zürcher Kammerorchester and cast in *Jakob Lenz*

© Toni Suter

A short, self-contained work in 13 scenes, the opera is based on an historical episode: the poet Jakob Lenz's three-week stay with the writer Johann Friedrich Oberlin in the late 18th century, during which he proceeds to experience a very Bergian descent into schizophrenia. *Wozzeck* is almost too easy a reference point, since Michael Fröhling's libretto is based on a Georg Büchner short story, but Lenz's haunting takes all the existential panic the stories share and gives it a physical form, in the form of a sextet of ghosts. The ghosts are simply marvellous creations: hissing, singing lullabies, giving body to Lenz's worst nightmares. Rihm writes beautifully for this unusual choral ensemble (SSAABB), shimmering microtonal material made even more uncanny by the perfectly-just-out-of-tune children's voices, **and the sections were delivered in all their gorgeous weirdness by members of Zürich's International Opera Studio, with Chelsea Zurflüh's knife-edge soprano a particular virtuosic performance.** Overall, the members of the IOS really got a chance to shine: Maximilian Lawrie did excellent work with the tremendous vocal challenge of the role of Kaufmann, and Jonas Jud delivered a wonderfully nuanced take on Oberlin, the rolling richness of his bass lines as satisfying in the spoken as in the sung sections.



Božena Bujnicka and Yannick Debus (Lenz)

© Toni Suter

But really, this is Jakob Lenz's opera. Fröhling's libretto, which also draws on Lenz's own letters and poems, creates a space in which Rihm can give a kind of physicality to the poet's obsessions, in which language itself seems to disintegrate: over and over, he repeats words until they lose meaning, culminating in the final scene of the opera, in which he whispers and shouts the word "konsequent" until lapsing into silence.

Yannick Debus, as Jakob Lenz, rises to the challenge of this difficult material. Debus was fantastic in the title role, his standing ovation well-earned. He brought deftness and complexity to both the spoken and sung parts of the role, whether clambering up and down towers of boxes or curled up in the foetal position, whether delivering the text in a broken whisper or hitting the high notes with aplomb. More importantly, perhaps, he makes you care about Lenz, unable to dismiss him as a madman as his contemporaries do. (There is a genuinely chilling moment in the final scene when the ghosts are *screaming* and no one but Lenz can hear them.) In the end, this remains the power of *Jakob Lenz*: to destabilise, to tug at the heartstrings, to leave you haunted.