



Genesis

Producer's Note from the playbill

Der Vampyr initially came to my attention as I researched operas that have existing orchestral reductions for fewer than twenty instruments. OperaHub had talked for a while about wanting to do shows that involve more than piano only, but as our mission is focused on intimate presentations of opera, a 25-60 person instrumental ensemble is simply not within our scope. When I found this opera on a list of reductions for rent last spring, I started to float the idea that OperaHub might do a vampire opera this year. I could feel people's ears perking up. Without any further information, a common response was "that sounds awesome!"

I began to research the piece and talk to people who were more familiar with it. Quickly the consensus became clear that while the music was excellent and it was once a popular piece, the story and libretto were, to contemporary ears, "not awesome."

Was there any way to bridge this gap between the widespread expectation that a vampire opera would be awesome and the somewhat disappointing reality of the actual work as seen in a modern context?

Many opera productions try to bridge similar historical and cultural gaps by updating or conceptualizing the production design and staging while keeping the original text intact and relying on the audience to fill in the interpretive leaps between the music and translated supertitles and what they see unfolding on the stage. Others, especially when dealing with the operetta or singspiel traditions, attempt to translate the libretto, and all of its original context, roughly into modern poetic English equivalents. I have seen excellent examples of both of those strategies, but more often have seen them come up short, taxing the audience's sense of suspension beyond its capacity. In the first few scenes these interpretations often feel promising, but begin unraveling as the conceptual premise's adherence to the given plot becomes less and less tenable, or the cultural expectations that the plot relies upon feel more and more antiquated. As a matter of fact, the BBC tried both of these strategies at once in their 1992 television adaptation of *Der Vampyr*; the result is a product that even in this moment of vampire saturation has not been re-released on DVD.

Among the particular problems of the original is its earnestness of tone combined with its reliance on vampire tropes that, though new when the opera was written, have been overdone to the point of ridicule in the intervening 185 years. How could we expect an audience not to laugh at the *deus ex machina* lightning bolt that destroys Ruthven in the original? or at the idea that all unmarried women would necessarily be virgins? How could we expect women not to chafe at the idea that the ultimate offense in committing sexual assault was against the man whose protection the woman was under and not against the woman's own body and mind?

When we brought John J King on board to work on an adapted libretto, we discussed wanting a text that would be fun and entertaining in an immediate and visceral way that would complement the thrilling drive of Marschner's score. We decided to ditch the original libretto and more or less start over within the confines of the musical structure. This allowed us to consolidate some of the smaller characters and ensemble members and redefine the major plot arcs to feel more in line with both contemporary vampire pop culture and our values regarding gender and sexual violence.

The resulting libretto is one that is funny enough to halt our first singthrough momentarily as our music director descended into a fit of laughter. It is also serious enough that, especially when taken in contrast to the original, is a strong statement about our views on women's independence in relation to historical patriarchal social structures and sexual violence.

We hope that this adaptation will meet the widespread expectations of "awesomeness" and will grow into a life beyond this particular production, the awesomeness spreading to other companies around the country.

To come full circle, it turned out that the existing orchestral reduction had been adapted with cuts and transpositions that did not meet our needs and we subsequently commissioned Moshe Shulman's six-instrument arrangement. As a company, we look forward to continuing to add new arrangements for reduced forces both to our repertoire and the repertoire available to other companies around the country.

Christie Lee Gibson
Producer & Director