

Greek Passion, The [Řecké pašije]

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Opera in four acts by Bohuslav Martinů to his own libretto with Nikos Kazantzakis after Jonathan Griffin's translation of Kazantzakis's novel *Christ Recrucified*; Zürich, Stadttheater, 9 June 1961.

Grigoris <i>priest of Lycovrissi</i>	bass-baritone
The Patriarcheas <i>an elder</i>	bass-baritone
Ladas <i>a miserly elder</i>	spoken
Michelis <i>son of the Patriarcheas</i>	tenor
Kostandis <i>a café owner</i>	baritone
Yannakos <i>a pedlar</i>	tenor
Manolios <i>a shepherd</i>	tenor
Nikolios <i>a shepherd boy</i>	soprano
Andonis <i>a barber</i>	spoken
Katerina <i>a young widow</i>	soprano
Panais [in some versions Panait] <i>her lover</i>	tenor
Lenio <i>engaged to Manolios</i>	soprano
An Old Woman	contralto
A Voice in the Crowd	baritone
Fotis <i>priest of the refugees</i>	bass-baritone
Despinio <i>a refugee</i>	soprano
An Old Man <i>a refugee</i>	bass
A Giant Standard-bearer	silent
Villagers, refugees, children	

Setting A mountainous area of Greece in the early 20th century

In late summer 1954 Martinů intended to set an operatic text dealing with Czech or Slovak subject matter, but his encounter with Kazantzakis's novel *Zorba the Greek* in autumn that year diverted him from native subjects. *Zorba* proved unsuitable for operatic adaptation, and Martinů settled instead on the novel *Christ Recrucified*, basing his English libretto on Jonathan Griffin's translation and beginning work late in 1954. He composed most of the music between February 1956 and January 1957 but without reaching a successful conclusion; he returned to the score in February 1958 and completed a final version on 15 January 1959. During the composition of the opera both Kubelík, for Covent Garden, and Karajan, for the Vienna Staatsoper, had shown interest in mounting a production of the work. None was forthcoming, largely because of Martinů's indecision over the final form, in particular the last scene of Act 4 which he had originally intended as a major solo for Katerina; this eventually became the brief valediction followed by a chorus which appears in all productions.

The première of the work did not take place in Martinů's lifetime. The opera was given under Paul Sacher at the Stadttheater in Zürich. Some six productions were staged in Czechoslovakia, including Brno, Prague and Bratislava. These were cut in various ways, but not consistently. Elsewhere on the Continent, *The Greek Passion* has been staged in Linz, Bielefeld, Plauen and Antwerp. The first British production, in a new English version by Brian Large, was given by the WNO at the New Theatre, Cardiff, on 29 April 1981.

Although Martinů went to some lengths to introduce local colour into his score through the use of Greek folksong and Orthodox chant, the musical language of the opera approximates in many ways to that of the cantatas to Czech texts by Miloslav Bureš, composed in the 1950s. The closeness to the Czech style of Martinů's last period goes in tandem with an adaptation of the novel which excludes all but two references to the Turks – a vital element in the original. By focussing on the human issues, without the added political dimension involved in the Turkish presence, Martinů fashioned an opera which is both realist and profoundly touching. The characteristically warm, though boldly original, diatonicism of his later style is apparent throughout *The Greek Passion*, notably in the grand choral statements of the conclusion. He makes use of a small number of recurring motifs which represent both ideas and characters. While many of the most effective moments occur in the large-scale choral contributions of the outer acts, Martinů sustains a considerable degree of dramatic tension in the solo exchanges of the various tableaux into which the opera is divided.

Synopsis

ACT 1 The village square in Lycovrissi

The act opens with the rejoicing of Easter morning – commemorated by the Orthodox liturgical melody which begins the work – as Grigoris announces the cast for the following year's Passion play. The apostles are chosen from among the village people as are the main characters: Panais is Judas, Katerina is Mary Magdalene and the young shepherd Manolios is Christ. As they contemplate the task of living exemplary lives in preparation for the following year, the sound of psalm singing is heard in the distance. Entering the

village is a ragged band of refugees driven from their home by the Turks. Grigoris and the village elders, not wishing any disruption, attempt to repulse them, but Manolios, Katerina and the 'apostles' give them comfort and suggest that they settle nearby on Mt Sarakina.

ACT 2.i-ii On the outskirts of the village, near Katerina's house

Yannakos worries about the heavy burden of his role as Peter. He is persuaded by the miserly Ladas to swindle the refugees out of their jewellery.

2.iii Outside the village, at the spring of St Basil

Katerina reveals her love for Manolios, who gently rejects her.

2.iv On Mt Sarakina

Recognizing their simplicity, goodness and genuine need, Yannakos gives the refugees the money that Ladas had entrusted to him to trade for their goods.

ACT 3.i In the mountains at night

Manolios is tortured by his human fallibility and Katerina's love for him. In an extended dream sequence he wrestles with his difficulties.

3.ii The same

Lenio, to whom Manolios is betrothed, asks him why he repulses her; she abandons him to his contemplation.

3.iii Katerina's house, the same night

Manolios descends to the village to tell Katerina that he can return her love only spiritually. Katerina accepts this unexpected change and becomes a follower.

3.iv At the roadside in the mountains, some weeks later

Katerina tells Yannakos of her conversion.

3.v An olive grove on the mountainside

Manolios, growing in stature, preaches of Christ's sacrifice and persuades the villagers to give money to the refugees. Grigoris and the elders plot the downfall of Manolios. The final moments of the act evoke the presence of Christ in the silence of the evening.

ACT 4.i *The village square in Lycovrissi*

The villagers celebrate the wedding of Lenio and Nikolios. At the height of the festivities Grigoris denounces the 'apostles' and excommunicates Manolios.

4.ii *The same*

In a superbly sustained monologue, Manolios announces his growing awareness of Christ and his intention to fight on behalf of the refugees. Denounced by Grigoris, the 'apostles' declare their support for Manolios. As the refugees approach from Sarakina to demand help, fighting breaks out and Manolios is killed by the Judas figure, Panais. Horrified by what has happened, Katerina speaks for the villagers in an exquisite valediction. Pulling themselves together, the refugees, led by their priest, Fotis, resolve to leave Lycovrissi to find a new home. Martinů had originally planned a concluding scena for Katerina but was persuaded by his publishers to substitute the present concerted end. While flying in the face of his original intentions, the conclusion Martinů provided set the seal on the effective epic qualities sustained through the separate tableaux of the opera.