

Inés de Castro

David Kettle

'Agora é tarde: Inês é morta' – 'It's too late: Inês is dead'. It's a fair bit darker than our own 'shutting the stable door after the horse has bolted', but that Portuguese expression, still in use today, conveys much the same idea – a missed opportunity, the futility of carrying out an action. And it refers directly back to the sombre – and true – story of the killing of Inés de Castro, Spanish mistress of the 14th-century Portuguese Prince Pedro, and the Prince's desperate rush back to court, too late to save her life.

That the expression is still used more than 550 years after those shocking events took place shows the enduring relevance that Inés's tragic tale still has in Portuguese language and culture. 'It's their national story in a way,' says composer James MacMillan, who created his grand operatic version of the Inés and Pedro story between 1991 and 1995. MacMillan's opera tells the story of the forbidden affair and the corpse crowned queen in all its gruesome detail – and on a huge scale. 'Nobody ever said to keep the score on the small side,' explains MacMillan. 'I grew up with opera, especially Wagner – I remember seeing Scottish Opera's *Götterdämmerung* back in the 1970s, with Alexander Gibson conducting. I can feel Wagner, Strauss, Berg and other composers in *Inés de Castro*, and I didn't shy away from allowing that tradition to be present in what I was writing.'

MacMillan's first contact with the Inés story was through a stage adaptation by playwright Jo Clifford that he saw in Edinburgh's Traverse Theatre in 1989. 'I wasn't aware of the story before seeing the play – Jo's version isn't necessarily historically accurate, but it had resonances that were very modern and archetypal. I was immediately struck by its operatic potential, and I spoke to the author about it that same night.'

Inés de Castro might have been MacMillan's first foray into traditional opera – 'although at the back of my mind I was probably on the lookout for an operatic subject,' he admits – but he had previously approached the form obliquely in two genre-subverting works. *Búsqueda* (1988) is a startling music theatre piece for singers, actors and what amounts to a jazz big band contrasting sections from the Latin Mass with poems by the Argentinian Mothers of the Disappeared; and *Visitatio sepulchri* (1993) is a 'sacred opera' based around a 14th-century Easter drama telling of the three Marys' visit to Christ's empty tomb. Alongside those stage works, though, MacMillan had also been exploring more abstract drama in the violent contrasts of style and mood of his non-stage music.



He wrote *The Confession of Isobel Gowdie*, the powerful orchestral work that put him firmly on the international map, in 1990, just a year before beginning work on *Inés de Castro*. 'Isobel Gowdie was originally going to be an opera,' MacMillan adds, 'but it ended up taking a different trajectory. But I think for a while there was a similar dramatic instinct at work in my non-stage music.'

Once MacMillan had decided on the Inés story, though, he approached Scottish Opera's then managing director Richard Mantle, who himself had been keen to discuss ideas for new works with the composer since the mid-1980s. 'Scottish Opera later commissioned the piece,' continues MacMillan, 'and I wrote most of it between 1993 and 1995. For a work like this, it seems like I have to give over my whole life to it for that period of time.' MacMillan's approach to composing the opera, however, was surprisingly straightforward. 'I just started at the beginning and worked through,' he explains. 'I like the sense of chronology, how one thing sets

up and prepares another, and how you can feel an almost real-time telling of the story.'

Inés de Castro's premiere – as one of the highlights of the 1996 Edinburgh International Festival – was no less grand than the work itself. 'I was absolutely terrified,' admits MacMillan. 'It was an event with an enormous profile – and it might have been just too big. There was a lot of expectation.' And initial reactions to the work were – well, mixed. 'Some people loved it, but others hated it. A lot of people responded really well, but there were deep aesthetic reasons why others didn't. They found the Grand Guignol aspect of it too much, the eerie, dark spectacle of it too ripe. It was a baptism of fire – I felt myself growing up very quickly as a composer.'

And if there's one side to *Inés de Castro* that audiences are sure to remember, it's its horror: the exhumed corpse crowned queen, the treacherous courtiers forced to kiss its rotting hand, the executioner's gleeful aria recounting (in stomach-churning detail) how he has tortured and killed the King's downright nasty advisor Pacheco. Why did MacMillan feel it was so important, not to turn away, but to confront the story's horror in such depth? 'In a sense, it's what gripped me and the play's initial audience,' he admits. 'It was entering into the heart of evil, which is as much a part of the human condition as anything else. There's a case to be made that when artists deal with the most unsettling



aspects of evil, it's an attempt to transcend that evil, to find some kind of redemption beyond it. And in spite of the carnage and horror of an opera like this, the final scene is one of hope, with the ghost of Inés trying to impart a message of redemption and forgiveness to a new generation.'

There are clear resonances between the opera's horrific events and more contemporary traumas, and MacMillan acknowledges them. 'In the mid-1990s it was the middle of the Yugoslav conflict, which was very much in our minds. It was pre-9/11, but there were buds of horror beginning to emerge that have now blossomed in quite awful ways. And the opera's horror mirrors so much of our own times as well, in the fierce, disturbing politics of Iraq, Syria or Gaza, for instance.'

But he's also clear that the opera's contemporary resonances should not point to a political agenda behind the work. 'I don't think the essence of this piece is about getting a message across. It's sheer coincidence that it touches on contemporary issues. I wouldn't want to use anything I do as a "loudhailer", even for obviously good causes like pacifism or humanitarian values – art in a sense stands separate from that. I have an ambivalence about art and politics mixing – I see pitfalls, and when artists give themselves over to be loudhailers for a political cause, you can see the art shrivel, and something else move into its place. If I thought this piece was simply a loudhailer piece, I'd have withdrawn it. It's more than that, thankfully.'



And despite its darkness, there is indeed plenty more in *Inés de Castro*, not least some vivid and surprisingly sympathetic portrayals of the opera's admittedly ambiguous characters. 'There are flaws in them all,' accepts MacMillan, 'but that gets right to the fact that we're all flawed, that we all have the potential for good and evil. Inés is maybe a bit shallow, but she's certainly a victim of her time and her context. Pacheco is the trickiest one, because he's a vile character, but he needs to be more than just a pantomime villain. I have more sympathy for Blanca, Pedro's spurned wife, than for anyone else – but of course she loses her mind.'

Blanca's mad scene in Act II is just one of the opera's clear connections with the traditions of grand opera. 'It's important to me with a piece like this,' says MacMillan, 'that opera-goers feel on recognisable ground – there's a scenario here that they can equate with their other experiences of opera.' Accordingly, Inés and Pedro have a touching love duet in Act I (cruelly interrupted by Pacheco), and the Act closes with a grand, almost Verdian quartet bringing together the two lovers and the darker duo of the King and Pacheco. 'I knew early on that it was going to be a work that was quite at ease with embracing tradition,' explains MacMillan. 'I think opera works because of certain traditions and set pieces. I'm relaxed about the impact of tradition on my own work – I still regard myself as a modernist, but I realise how much tradition is important to me. Back when I wrote *Inés de Castro*, it was much more subconscious – I was veering towards an instinct that held Verdi and Wagner, for example, in high regard, and I was quite at ease subconsciously about allowing that to shape my music.'

MacMillan has made revisions to the score for its 2015 production – some minor, and one substantial. 'There are some issues to do with word setting that I've changed – the voice register, for example, or filleting the scoring to allow the words to be heard better.' His major change is the removal of much of the opera's original third scene, in which Inés and her nurse reminisce about their earlier lives in Spain. 'In retrospect it seemed rather static – I thought I had to be brutal, and you can afford to be brutal when you're a different person – or an older person.'

Indeed, MacMillan has felt like he's encountering the work afresh in approaching it for the first time as both conductor and composer, almost two decades after its premiere. 'I'm now learning the piece objectively, as an interpreter – in a sense I've got to learn it as a new score. It's like reading old letters – you can see something of yourself in it, but you realise how much you've changed in the years since.' And despite MacMillan's subsequent operatic achievements – including *The Sacrifice* for Welsh National Opera in 2007, and 2011's chamber opera *Clemency*, co-commissioned by Scottish Opera, ROH2, Britten Sinfonia and Boston Lyric Opera – his first work in the genre has lost none of its power to shock, unsettle and provoke.

Opposite: Portuguese Prime Minister Antonio de Oliveira Salazar (centre) meets Spanish head of state General Francisco Franco (left) in Seville, 1942.

WHAT TO LISTEN OUT FOR

A sense of ritual

Inés de Castro's dark, powerful opening makes an immediate impact, with the chorus basses (whom MacMillan indicates in the score may be priests or altar servants) slowly intoning the *Stabat Mater*, one of the most vivid and sorrowful of the Marian liturgical texts, joined gradually by the other chorus voices in an increasingly urgent, ritualistic yearning for protection and peace. That sense of ritual continues with the reappearance of the choral *Stabat Mater* at the end of Act I, underpinning the quartet as Pedro is sent off to a seemingly futile battle, and then again at the opera's culminating coronation scene.

Duets of many hues

MacMillan is keen to highlight *Inés de Castro's* links with the set pieces of traditional grand opera – none more so than the vocal duet, which he explores in strikingly contrasting ways. The King's nervous stutterings are contrasted tellingly with the long, calmly assured lines of Pacheco at their first meeting, and the vocal melodies of Inés and Blanca, Pedro's spurned wife, float uneasily around tremolo clusters both times they meet. MacMillan waits until almost the end of Act I to reveal the love between Pedro and Inés that has caused the opera's turmoil, but when he does, it is in a grand love duet, with the two characters' voices intimately intertwining in some of the opera's most touchingly vulnerable music.

Vocal decorations

Distinctive turns and embellishments bring a sense of exoticism to some of MacMillan's vocal writing, as well as highlighting rare moments of warmth and affection. They are there in Inés's opening aria, and in Pedro's offstage calling to her before their love duet, which itself is heavy with intertwining vocal melismas. Ironically, even the song of the mysterious old woman who takes Inés gently towards her death shows a degree of compassion with its evocative vocal ornaments.

A panoply of percussion

MacMillan makes abundant use of an enormous kitchen of percussion in his rich orchestration, often using particular instruments to evoke specific moods or characters. The King vacillates over the fate of Inés to a staccato accompaniment of log drums, temple blocks and bongos; the distinctive, ghostly sound of a waterphone describes the old woman beckoning Inés towards death; and a single tolling bell punctuates Pedro's realisation that Inés has been murdered. Most strikingly, a violent side-drum tattoo brings Act I to an unsettling conclusion, mirrored in the ominous rumbling of timpani, thundersheet and lion's roar that opens Act II.

Blanca's mad scene

It may begin in relative lucidity, but Blanca's inexorable descent into madness charted in her Act II aria – recounting her painful relations with Pedro and the creatures she bore as a result – is mirrored in an increasingly angular vocal melody that rises ever higher in more and more exaggerated gestures, reaching its most explosive and dangerously unpredictable music as she reveals her fateful encounter with Inés's children.

The Executioner's Song

The macabre (and horrifically specific) details of the torture and killing of Pacheco towards the end of Act II draw a whole range of musical styles from MacMillan – from stomping oom-pah rhythms to laughing trumpets and a braying clarinet, before a deranged waltz slowly disintegrates into thudding, futile clusters low on the piano.

David Kettle is a music critic for *The Scotsman* and *The Telegraph*, and has written about music for a broad range of publications including *Classical Music*, *The Strad*, *The Times* and *BBC Music Magazine*.

