

*Cesare Fertonani*

After *Richard III* (2005), *CO<sub>2</sub>* is the second opera by Giorgio Battistelli and Ian Burton. The title is a reference to the chemical formula for carbon dioxide, the substance which is indispensable in the vital processes of nature – including breathing in humans and animals, and photosynthesis in plants – but which at the same time is, along with other substances, responsible for global warming and the greenhouse effect that threaten the earth. At the heart of the opera, then, is one of the most topical – and controversial – issues of our times, to which a long list of novels and films as well as a wealth of scientific publications have been dedicated. The content of *CO<sub>2</sub>* has been inspired by numerous sources. The first is the “Gaia hypothesis”, formulated by sir James Lovelock in his book *Gaia: A New Look at Life on Earth* (1979). It is a holistic theory which considers the earth as a living, self-regulating planet, whose geophysical elements are maintained in conditions suitable to sustaining life thanks to the behaviour of the animal and vegetable organisms that inhabit it. Then, there is cosmogony as conceived in the myths of Hinduism (the god Shiva who dances over the world to burn it and then recreate it from its own ashes in a process of continuous and infinite regeneration), and in the Judeo-Christian culture (from the creation to the Garden of Eden). The opera also includes more recent events, such as the signing of the Kyoto Protocol (1997), aimed at the gradual reduction of gas emissions that pollute the atmosphere; the devastating tsunami in the Indian Ocean that struck on 26<sup>th</sup> December 2004; the hurricanes that periodically hit different areas of the world; the globalisation of the market and the problems caused by air traffic.

The opera is divided into nine scenes, plus a prologue and an epilogue. The dramatic structure centres on the lecture given by a climatologist whose name is emblematic of the entire human race: David Adamson. As he attempts to explain the risks facing the planet and endangering the survival of humanity, he himself comes to realise the absolute necessity of loving the environment in which we live and for which we are all personally responsible, and not merely of respecting its ecology.

In scene after scene, Adamson’s lecture is interrupted by and interspersed with episodes or insights, according to a postmodern narrative logic that generates a whirlwind of “short-circuits” in time and space. So, alongside David Adamson appear a range of diverse characters: four archangels (Raphael, Uriel, Gabriel and Michael); scientists and ecologists; Adam, Eve and the Serpent; Gaia, the ancient Greek goddess of the earth; Mrs Mason, the sister of a survivor of the tsunami, and Mr Changtalay, a Thai hotel manager; and also young people, travellers, women doing their shopping.

The libretto is in English, the international language of communication and globalisation *par excellence*, but the opera is actually open to multilingualism. Two scenes, the second – which takes place in an airport during a strike – and the third – which represents the debate at the international confer-

ence that will produce the Kyoto Protocol – focus on the idea of a linguistic Babel, while we hear choruses in Latin (Scene 1), in Sanskrit (Scene 5) and in ancient Greek (Scene 8). The operatic dimension is to be found, first of all, in the clarity of the dramatic structure and development of the scenes, as well as in the distribution and identity of the vocal parts. David Adamson, the protagonist, is a baritone; the archangels Raphael, Uriel, Michael and Gabriel are respectively three basses and a soprano; Adam and Eve could only be a tenor and a soprano, as are Mr Changtalay and Mrs Mason, while the unnerving ambiguity of the Serpent has the icy, asexual voice of the countertenor. The drama involves the use of traditional operatic forms such as the aria, the duet, the recitative, the *Sprechgesang* or the spoken parts, as well as choral parts and moments of dance. In this wide variety of musical and expressive forms, the arias of David Adamson (Scenes 1 and Epilogue) and of the Serpent (Scene 5), the duet of Adam and Eve (Scene 5) and the recitative and aria of Gaia (Scene 8) are of particular intensity.

The specifically social nature of the themes is reflected in the opera's choral dimension, or in the interaction between the individual characters and a collective context of which the chorus is the voice. Indeed, despite its diversified composition and function, the chorus is an essential presence in all the scenes, except the eighth. The musical development on both the solo and the choral levels of the text is modelled, particularly in the part of the protagonist, with refined accuracy. It shows a wide range of nuances and expressive techniques, and numerous forms of chanted recitation: the latter includes the repeated intonation of a single note, the free rhythmic development of a melodic line, or the inclusion of rhythmical pauses like natural inflections in the discourse). Such attention to the rendering of the text's syntactic and semantic structure finds correspondence in the inventive treatment of the orchestra, in which the percussions have a major role, especially in the music of the creation (Prologue) and the hurricanes (Scene 4).

*(Traduzione di Chris Owen)*