

**GERALD BARRY**

**The Bitter Tears of Petra von Kant**

Opera (2002–2005) 150'

Text: Rainer Werner Fassbinder; English version by Denis Calandra (G,E)

Scoring: 3 sopranos, mezzo-soprano, contralto, 1 'mute' female character;  
2(I+picc, II+afl&picc).2(II+ca).2.Bcl.3(III+Cbn)—4.2(I/II+Tpt in D).3.1—timp.2perc—  
pft—strings

*Publisher: OUP Oxford University Press*

Petra von Kant, a successful but arrogant fashion designer in her mid-30s, falls passionately in love with Karin, a beautiful, cunning young woman who wants a career in modelling. Watching over everything, but never uttering a single word, is the enigmatic Marianne, the slavish secretary, maid and co-designer, whom Petra takes every opportunity to humiliate. Petra and Karin seal their newfound relationship with a torrid kiss, but the aftermath is devastating. – Irish composer Gerald Barry sets to music the original screen play of Fassbinder's film but interestingly reverses the films slowness and languid atmosphere of long, muted and eerie silences into the opposite, as if presenting the emotional negative (or positive, depending on one's viewpoint) of the drama: music and diction are almost relentlessly driven, loud and brass heavy eruptions alternate with obsessive, repetitive orchestral patterns mirroring the inescapable mechanics of the inner going ons.

**FP: 27 May 2005 National Concert Hall, Dublin**

(in concert)

Rayanne Dupuis / Mary Plazas / Stephanie Marshall /  
Deirdre Cooling-Nolan / Sylvia O'Brien / RTÉ National  
Symphony Orchestra / Cond.: Gerhard Markson

Recording: CMC Sound Archive / RTÉ 261 CD



**FP staged: 16 Sep 2005 Coliseum, London** (English National Opera)

Stephanie Friede / Rebecca von Lipinski / Susan Bickley / Kathryn Harries / Barbara Hannigan / Linda Kitchen / Directed by Richard Jones / Costumes & decors: Ultz /  
Cond.: André de Ridder

**German Premiere: 04 May 2008 Theater Basel**

(co-operationw with the English National Opera)

Rayanne Dupuis / Eva Gilhofer / Heike Heilmann / Rita Ahonen / Agata Wilowska /  
Linda Kitchen / Sinfonieorchester Basel / Richard Jones / André de Ridder

**Further performances: 09/13/15/19/24/28 May 2008 and 06/11 Jun 2008**



Photo: Peter Schnetz

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## Press reviews

*"There is real expressive subtlety in this score ... it's one of the strangest but most satisfying of recent operas."*

TOM SERVICE, *The Guardian*

*"I've never seen an audience so engaged post-show..."*

ROBERT THICKNESSE, *The Times*

*"The opera bursts with exuberance ... on its own terms, this works. Petra von Kant will do what opera was originally meant to do: amuse and entertain, with an edge of wit."*

ANNE OZORIO, *Seen and Hear Opera Review*

*"The piece is invigorating, fresh, and curiously satisfying. Barry perfectly captures the barren, pungent, desperate world of Fassbinder, but does so with unstoppably upbeat material."*

KEITH CLARKE, *Musical America*

*"The score is unmistakably thrilling, and its approach to music theatre strikingly original. All of Fassbinder's wordy text is included, not set to music in a conventional operatic sense (though Barry's way of dealing with words, often faster than normal speaking speed and totally avoiding any kind of florid decoration, is striking in itself) but part of a total musical context in which the vocal lines are just one element ... The story is dramatically tight and unswerving. There are just five singing roles, all female, and their conversational exchanges are sometimes savage, sometimes bleakly comic, though Barry never pauses to make such obvious dramatic points. His music rampages along, with furious brassy marches and toccatas, cutting across the vocal lines and often suggesting a totally different emotional scenario altogether. It is all extraordinarily exhilarating, and this performance under Markson had real cumulative intensity."*

ANDREW CLEMENTS, *The Guardian*

*"Richard Jones's production, designed by Ultz, is one of the most impressive I have seen. It looks fantastic, and balances visual absurdities (such as a giant cuddly kangaroo) with a stern emotional core. Though Petra's breakdown is inevitable from the moment we first see her barking down the phone in a maribou-trimmed mu-mu, Jones handles her humiliation with tenderness. Karin, whose Poppea-like ambition is as ugly as her family background, is skillfully transformed during her seduction: in outward appearance, as she dons a series of outfits from Petra's collection, and in bearing, as she colonises the catwalk beyond the proscenium arch. As Petra's frienemy Sidonie, Bickley delivers a perfectly judged performance; matched by Harries and Hannigan in their brief but demanding roles as Petra's mother and daughter. The lynchpin, however, is Linda Kitchen's Marlene: mute, demure, besotted, and broiling with rage."*

ANNA PICARD, *Independent*

*"Gerald Barry's new opera, which sets Fassbinder's text in its entirety, careers along like a charging rhino, the dialogue delivered lickety-split, supported pervasively by aggressive brass in full cry, often doubling the vocal line. It is erotic, exhausting, histrionic, at times hilarious. Or is it? Director Richard Jones, the cast and the conductor Andre de Ridder, who has the ENO orchestra playing at white heat, made it seem so at the enthralling world premiere. Indeed, Jones' production is a superlative masterclass in stagecraft, required viewing for those cohorts of unweaned young directors peddling undigested ideas. Within Ultz's cool, fashionable interior, he thrillingly choreographs the emotional maelstrom and power games resulting from svelte couturier Petra's obsession with the callow, exploitative Katrin, from her secretary Marlene's tormented, masochistic passion for her. Direction, design and lighting (Mimi Jordan Sherrin) are a symbiotic triumph. Meanwhile Stephanie Friede's 'tour de force' of a Petra commandingly tames vocal lines as vertiginous as volatile temperature charts. So does Barbara Hannigan as Petra's dysfunctional daughter Gabriele, a deeply disturbing portrayal."*

DAVID BLEWITT, *The Stage*