

Kepler-Motets: Harmonies and Witchcraft Trial
Premiere of Kepler-Motets and the presentation of a book about Kepler's mother at the
Pfleghofsaal.

By Martin Bernklau 19.01.2019 10.00

[Photo]

Cerys Purser as Katharina Kepler, who was accused of witchcraft. Photograph:Bernklau

Tübingen. Cambridge and Tübingen under the banner of Johannes Kepler, the great scholar and his mother Katharina who was acquitted in a trial for witchcraft. The organisers who are members of the Graduiertenkolleg [Research Training Group] "Religiöses Wissen im vormodernen Europa" [Religious Knowledge in Premodern Europe] were truly overwhelmed by the response elicited by "Keplers Welten" [Kepler's Worlds] which took place before a capacity audience at the Pfleghof in Tübingen. This was a German-British event which combined science with the arts, and history with topicality.

There is no doubt that the great astronomer, mathematician, philosopher, physicist, mechanic, theologian, astrologer and poet, who was born in 1571 in Weil der Stadt, grew up in Leonberg and attended the Maulbronn Monastery school, was also a true Tübingen man, studying at the local university. (His friend and fellow student Besold, a jurist, would be of special significance during the witchcraft trial.) The crucial connection between Cambridge and the venerable St. John's College was established by the Tübingen-born historian, Professor Ulinka Rublack who teaches there. In the hall of the Pfleghof she presented her book "The Astronomer and the Witch", written in typically readable Anglo-Saxon style.

Tim Watts, composer and teacher at the College, was inspired by this special aspect of the epochal figure of Kepler. Watts, in turn, had close links to the powerfully voiced Mezzosoprano Cerys Purser and the phenomenal a Capella ensemble Gesualdo Six who, inclusive of two counter tenors, represent the best in English singing.

Watts had composed for them, among others, the opera "Kepler's Trial", which was premiered at St. John's College in 2016, and now he has added the four "Kepler Motets", which were premiered at the Schulberg, Tübingen, on Thursday. To Ulinka Rublack, Katharina Kepler's courageous tenacity in the face of death and torture has been as much a point of interest of this unusually well documented trial as the audacious (legal) engagement of her famous eldest son. But she also examines and depicts the religious-spiritual fanaticism just before the beginning of the Thirty Year War, the collective hysteria and the destructive forces at work that also affect the family: The three surviving siblings had cut off all contact with their denounced and accused old mother. It is worth mentioning that Kepler, too, reproached himself for the rest of his life, wondering whether his student novel "Somnium" (The Dream) had actually provoked his mother's indictment for witchcraft.

Kepler's Sense of Humour

Not only was Tim Watts' music framed by historical pieces sung by the Gesualdo Six - such as a drinking song by Johann Hermann Schein or a wonderfully intoned motet by Orlando di Lasso - but sound world and techniques of the Renaissance and Early Baroque have also been incorporated into the Opera and the Motets. Not to mention Kepler, himself, who called his most important works "Harmonices Mundi" and who, naturally, was musical. And he had a sense of humour. This is why composer Tim Watts based a half-serious piece, involving communal singing, on Kepler's play on words "Misera et Famina" (misery and hunger) around the motif Mi-Fa-Mi.

Excerpts from the Opera, sung by Cerys Purser and accompanied by the Gesualdo Six and, at times, by the composer on the piano, were highly impressive and dramatic. Purser emerged from the dark in a semi-staged performance. Watts based the text of the Motets on poetic sentences and fragments by the romantic writer Novalis ("Zu dir kehr ich zurück") and by Friedrich Hölderlin but also on original Kepler quotations in Latin, and text and melody of a choral by Philipp Nicolai "Wie schön leuchtet der Morgenstern".

Everything was interconnected - in precise correspondence to Johannes Kepler's new, but still Christian-devout Copernican world view at the epochal turning point towards the modern age and located between mathematics, mysticism and magic. In addition to the German-British exchange on the subjects of literature, music and (historical) science there was a British variation on the subject of Kepler's sense of humour making this a most wonderfully enjoyable event in the age of Brexit. This was confirmed by the enthusiastic applause and the delightfully cheerful atmosphere during the reception that followed. (GEA)