



The Minotaur of Amstetten


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 Sometimes real life takes on the ghastly proportions of a monstrous myth. Listening to the deep and complex musical drama of Harrison Birtwhistle's [Minotaur](#) at the Royal Opera House it was impossible not to make the links between the Cretan Labyrinth and a cellar in [Amstetten](#),  Austria.

As a daily newsroom journalist covering the blood, gore and cruelty of the world there was nothing I liked more than settling down in front of a classical Greek tragedy. Somehow the dramatisation of horrors into a narrative of symbolic significance helped make sense of the eternal, random viciousness of human existence.

It would be trite to compare the story of [Joseph Fritzl](#) and his daughter Elizabeth to theatre. Yet there is something timeless about the depths that he had sunk to. This was not a particularly contemporary crime. All the talk about Austria's uniquely oppressive culture, the influence of Nazism, the post-modern collapse of the family and so on is just media froth. It is bar-room (or rather newsroom) philosophy and water-cooler psychoanalysis.

The stories of Greek drama and myth tell us of the universal nature of human barbarity. Even the most intelligent minds are capable of turning power into pain and desire into agony.  In Harrison's [Minotaur](#) we see how Ariadne manipulates Theseus for her own ends. The Athenian's rescue mission is noble, but it also involves a deceit that will continue to hurt people far in to the future. And in the labyrinth, in the cellar, is the half-beast who literally feeds off the human price paid for a trade in politics and power.

 n David Harsent's extraordinarily poetic libretto the monster underground is ultimately the most human soul. Cursed by its parenting and haunted by his appalling appetites the Minotaur is a trapped killer. It is the most exceptional of creatures and yet symbolises a blood-lust that runs through most human history. 

Birtwhistle's *Minotaur* has now finished its run at the [ROH](#) but if it is ever revived please go along. It is not easy listening but both musically and dramatically it is a profound piece of work magnificently executed at Covent Garden.

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