

# Synopsis - "Schlagt sie tot!"

*Libretto: Eva Sommestad Holten*

*Music: Bo Holten*

*The opera is sung in German, with the Swedish libretto translated by Jana Hallberg.*

## ACT I

### **Opening - experiencing the old faith, soon to be lost**

In the sensuous setting of flickering candles, relics, and prayers, we meet the little audacious *Landgrave Philip of Hesse*, 14 years of age, who by the secretary *Spalatin* is introduced to *The Elector Frederick the Wise of Saxony's* huge collection of relics.

The Elector also secures Luther's activities, as this controversial doctor of theology gives fame to his new university of Wittenberg. And, who knows? Luther might be a true prophet. The little landgrave Philip does not yet know, that the defence of the reformation will be his life and fate.

### **Luther connecting to his lifelong closest companions**

We enter the crowded sunlit square. Spalatin's next duty is to welcome the new professor in Greek, Philip Schwarzerd called *Melanchthon*, recommended by the great Erasmus and now arriving escorted by Luther's colleague *Andreas Karlstadt*. The excited students want him to meet their hero; *Martin Luther*. In a golden moment Melanchthon and Luther connect in a bondage that will shape their lives. Luther insistence on one truth has a magic attraction, but is also a challenge to the new ideals of humanism.

Spalatin continues to the workshop of *Lucas Cranach*, a wonder world of imagery and new printing presses. To promote Wittenberg, the Elector wants all Luther pamphlets be printed by Cranach, and a Luther portrait by him to be distributed all over Europe. Entering the workshop Luther is overwhelmed, but most important feels a special peace in the company of Lucas and *Barbara Cranach*. As the first Luther portrait is sketched, they form the unique partnership of propaganda, that with pamphlets, satires and portraits will brand and shape the image of Luther.

### **Modes of criticism challenging both sides**

- After the election of emperor Charles V, all notabilities meet in Cologne. Late at night the Elector calls for *Erasmus of Rotterdam* to advise him on the "Luther problem".

Erasmus supports many of Luther's views, but finds his aggressiveness risky, as it might trigger unrest, - "tumultus". He suggests a non-provocative hearing at the next diet in Worms.

- Parallel to this, Luther in Wittenberg, in great excitement, writes to the Pope. He mixes servility and attacks, finally enclosing his latest pamphlet, instructing the Pope on a true Christian life.

- A third parallel location shows the luxury and license of Rome.

### **Rebellious actions, soon meeting criticism.**

In response to the burning of Luther's writings and to the papal bull, a burning is arranged in Wittenberg. The Canon law and the bull is thrown into the flames. An aggressive pageant follows, with radical students mocking the Pope. Melanchthon feels the uneasiness of lost control.

Luther asks Erasmus for support, but the answer is criticizing. For the humanists Spalatin and Melanchthon, Erasmus should be listened to. But Luther gets furious, and insists on the word of God as war and provocation, leaving Spalatin and Melanchthon confounded and partly appalled.

### **Preparing and surviving the DIET OF WORMS**

Barbara Cranach confronts Karlstadt's tearing down of altars, statues etc. When she seeks Luther's support, he defends destroying objects in order to extinct false beliefs.

Lucas Cranach insists on the utility images, showing Luther a new portrait of himself, to be sold at the diet of Worms, - the upcoming event, that Luther so much fears.

At his triumphant tour to Worms, Luther preaches to the crowds and plays the lute at the inns. The night before appearing for the diet, he prays in fright and despair.

The next morning, Luther is asked to confirm his authorship of a huge pile of books, and to recant its content. He refuses, while criticizing pope and church. He insists that he talks for the ordinary Germans, and that Scripture alone is infallible. Afterwards the views upon Luther ranges from admiration to horror. But even cardinals are aware of the Roman moral collapse, and in the streets, people are kissing Cranach's new Luther portrait. Who dares to burn Luther as a heretic?

The event is closed with the pompous exit of the emperor. On behalf of his master the Elector, Spalatin takes care of the broken-down Luther, shivering in his cell.

### **Lost control and radical change**

Luther's talk of freedom has opened the box of Pandora. The world is turned upside down in the longing for change and righteousness. Movements sprawl and clash. Feeling that they have been fooled, people attack authorities and ridicule clergy. But where is Luther?

In Wittenberg Castle Church, similar radical change unfolds in a calmer setting. Andreas Karlstadt is fighting old rituals, and with Melanchthon at his side he monitors the removal of statues and paintings. Suddenly Luther appears escorted by Spalatin, returning from the secured custody at the Wartburg. But with Luther claiming himself the sole leader, Karlstadt announces his leaving Wittenberg - in a final blow declaring Luther a "wannabe" pope and prophet.

### **Authority at stake - triumphs and non-triumphs...**

Though by glowing preaching again taking command, Luther is frustrated by all problems. But he finds peace with the Cranach's and the success of his new German bible.

When the arrival of twelve fleeing nuns is announced he cheers up, planning for their husbands. Some are housed with the Cranachs, among them the spokeswoman, *Katharina von Bora*. Luther boasts to Melanchthon, arriving with a script, what a triumph these nuns are for the new faith.

Melanchthon reminds Luther of the less triumphant facts - as peasants referring to him when revolting, and lost support among the learned. Referring to the script, Luther's attack on Erasmus, Melanchthon finally criticizes Luther. A disturbed Luther promises to follow his advice: To try to calm down both sides in the surging peasants war, that has now reached his home town Eisleben.

### **Collapse of the hero - Luther and the peasants war**

In Eisleben the convent of Helfta is burnt down by the peasants. Crying and abused nuns are lingering in the ruins. A lunatic recognizes Luther, accusing him of having ignited the hate and the war. The schizophrenia gets even worse, as nuns attack him and peasants thank him - and finally the youngster Landgrave Philip of Hesse turns up as commander, also commenting on his guilt. Standing as a scapegoat in the waste and ruins of war, Luther is filled by fear, despair and rage. With the words of the famous pamphlet he calls for that the peasants be stopped and slaughtered: Me, Martin Luther says: Slay them!

## ACT II:

### **Bottom reached - and the power of music facing evil**

The coffin of the dead Elector is on display in the Castle Church, where Luther too is hiding and praying. Melanchthon supports him, but also tries to question his acting in relation to the war. Spalatin enters, telling of the peasants being defeated in a true massacre. Luther's reaction is claiming, that he himself killed all the peasants, as he commanded this be done. This is too much for Spalatin, who leaves the church and Wittenberg. Melanchthon stays with his disturbed friend.

Luther is praying all night in anguish. In the morning he is still fighting his demons.

A sloppy group of singers arrives to rehearse, and Luther commands them to sing, to fight the evil. By the power of music, everyday life is transformed - music is for Luther God's way to influence and control our feelings and thereby the rest. Polyphony is the true image on of the divine.

### **Rising from hell - with a new life to be an everyday life**

Cranach tells Luther to cheer up with his own advice: Good company, including women. Luther explodes in hatred against false celibacy, interrupted by Barbara who has got her nuns from Nimbschen to console him with music. Käthe von Bora takes advantage to tell, that she doesn't want her planned husband - should she return to the convent? Cranach advises Luther to marry her to prevent a PR catastrophe, her audacity also proving, that she can handle his deranged life.

Singing students return and join their girls in Wittenberg, slandering about the Luther marriage.

Luther embraces his Käthe, describing how sinful lust becomes divine creation in marriage.

She might be hated, but will soon be a model and ideal in the new faith. But thinking of all hatred, darkness enters his mind: Now the landgrave Philip of Hesse will force him to unite with the Swiss reformers, headed by the music-hating "Zwingel"-Zwingli!

### **Looking for unity, agreements and peace**

Philip of Hesse wants unity of protestants at the upcoming diet of Augsburg, and he is fed up with Luther's aggressiveness. He invites all top reformers to Marburg, where a disputation is held. But the discord regarding the Lords Supper can't be solved, and Luther's treatment of Zwingli shocks the meeting. The Landgrave Philip announces with despair the failure, and points at Melanchthon as speaker for Wittenberg at the Augsburg diet.

At the castle of Coburg, Luther awaits news from Augsburg, while in a carefree mood writing letters to Käthe and Melanchthon. He alternately praises and assails Melanchthon, basically not believing in these Augsburg negotiations. Himself he fights with the devils and works hard, but finds pleasure in being in the realm of birds.

### **King of the table and the close circle**

Years later in Wittenberg, Cranach delivers a new set of portraits, to be branded as "old authority". With Luther in bad mood, the portraits cheer him up. The table is set for dinner and "table talk".

As a king of the table Luther is targeting persons present as well as favourite enemies. He is interrupted by Melanchthon, announcing Philip von Hesse and an English delegation. Luther declares such negotiations useless, and for Melanchthon to take care of.

Left with Käthe Melanchthon seeks her support. Once he could not imagine living without Luther. Now he is terrorized by his moods, and unable to influence him. Käthe reminds, that the magic and bully strength of Luther were once needed.

### **Fighting to the bitter end**

Luther enters the Cranach workshop with a fresh pamphlet against the papacy, requesting new humiliating woodcuts. Lucas Cranach responds, that as court painter he will always do what he is told to do. As a friend, he suggests to stop now – no one is listening anymore. Luther reacts with fury and slams the door.

Käthe, hearing about the incident confronts Luther, who breaks down in a depressive and self-accusing mood. She desperately tries to help, while he is torn between doubt and trust in God. He ends up telling Käthe to do like him; to hide behind the screen of Christ to escape the wrath of God.

### **Finale – “TUMULTUS”**

The emperor besieges Wittenberg - the war and final “tumultus” has come. The Cranachs leave, loaded with paintings following their imprisoned Elector. Käthe, trying to secure Luther’s death mask, is comforted by Barbara: We transformed society, she insists. Those to blame are the lazy and greedy, who refused to reform themselves!

Käthe hands the mask to Melanchthon, who in turn is caught by the second prisoner, Philip of Hesse, who wants to say goodbye. They agree they failed - to unite wings, to reconcile with Rome and to prevent war. But looking at the strangely calm death mask, they know that Luther the man succeeded, ending as a hero and a prophet. You loved him, didn’t you, says the Landgrave, Melanchthon responding: Were we not all seduced?

*Eva Sommestad Holten*