

The New Criterion

Music

October 2009

Salzburg chronicle

by [Jay Nordlinger](#)

On the 2009 Salzburg Festival.

If it's "Festspielzeit," as the locals say—"festival time"—it's the Vienna Philharmonic. The VPO is the anchor of the Salzburg Festival: its resident orchestra, its spine. Opera productions may appall and soloists fall short: but the VPO should deliver, time after time. Like the Berlin Philharmonic, it has a very high reputation, and is the object of a lot of hype. But, like the BPO's, the VPO's reputation is pretty much deserved—and hype, though annoying, can be ignored.

One Saturday morning in the Grosses Festspielhaus this season, the VPO played a concert under Franz Welser-Möst, a local boy, almost—he's from Linz—and the music director of the Cleveland Orchestra. In 2010, he will assume a very big post in his native land: music director of the Vienna State Opera. The concert in Salzburg began with Schumann's Cello Concerto, a curious piece. Like the Violin Concerto, it is something of a neglected stepchild among Schumann's works. (How about the opera *Genoveva*?) The Cello Concerto has its champions, but, in my view, it is a weak piece by a great composer—but one with a lovely, songful little F-major slow movement. The soloist with the VPO was—guess what?—a local boy: Clemens Hagen, who comes from a musical family. These Salzburgers formed the Hagen Quartet, in kind of a stringy, smaller version of the von Trapps.

The Schumann Concerto began with disunity from Welser-Möst and the VPO, including a bad pizzicato. As for Hagen, he proved himself dutiful, workmanlike. It is to his credit that he did not descend to bathos; but he was not particularly inspired. Nor did he make a particularly impressive sound: It tended toward whininess. But, when *piano*, it was far better, even beautiful. In any case, you could always turn your ears to the VPO.

The major piece on the program came after intermission, and that was Bruckner's Ninth Symphony. Welser-Möst led a sensible performance—but there was nothing really to distinguish it. It did not stumble, and it did not soar; it did not leave cold, and it did not overwhelm. It was a hard performance to criticize—it was just ... there. The VPO, however, is an orchestra virtually made for Bruckner, particularly with those rich, glowing strings. And how strange to hear horns that do not flub. I must tell you, however, that the symphony ended rather like the concert began: with a series of bad pizzicatos.

And here is a footnote: It's a source of anguish to some people that the VPO has few women in it. And the violinist, on this occasion, in the concertmaster's chair? She was a concertmistress.

And now to opera (uh-oh): Over the years, readers have heard me describe, lament, and decry many productions at the Salzburg Festival. There is a futility or danger about doing this. You know what they say about wrestling with a pig? There's no percentage in it: You get dirty and the pig likes it.

Well, if you denounce Salzburg opera productions, they like it, thinking that your denunciations confirm them in their innovative excellence. You're a fuddy-duddy, you see, and they are fresh and daring, advancing the art of opera. Keeping it "up-to-date," you know; preventing it from "stagnating."

Directors are particularly violative of Mozart. By what they have his characters do, they change his operas around, making the librettos nonsensical, and often clashing with the music, too. (If you want to know how to direct Mozart, you will find it in the music.) Donna Anna actually likes and seeks out Don Giovanni. And, in *The Marriage of Figaro*, the Countess and Cherubino are actually getting it on—Susanna is getting it on with him, too. In fact, they have something of a three-way. Just the way Mozart and Da Ponte intended, huh?

When it comes to Salzburg opera productions, I have sometimes found it helpful simply to close my eyes and think of England.

A particular shame about this year's *Marriage of Figaro* is that Salzburg had a gold-plated Mozart cast—who did not deserve to show their wares in such a production, or mis-production. In the title role was Luca Pisaroni, who has a streamlined bass well suited to Mozart. He is a fine actor, too—looking, when goofing off, like Roberto Benigni. The Countess was Dorothea Röschmann, who was not at her best the evening I attended: The voice was more heavily draped than usual. But you will take Röschmann on her very worst night, because she is a Mozartean (and other things) for all time, or at least a long time.

The Count was Gerald Finley, who sang well and acted superbly: This was a klutzy and volatile Count, one it was hard to take your eyes off. Susanna, Marlis Petersen, was completely winsome: just as Susanna should be, or can be. You have seen and heard saucier and sassier Susannas, but there was something about Petersen's more demure approach that was irresistible. (She was as demure as the production allowed.) Cherubino was Katija Dragojevic, from Sweden (yes), who not only sang well, but interestingly: An occasional lack of vibrato—a flattening out (but not of pitch)—was effective. Incidentally, the way they did her hair, she looked like Alfalfa, from *The Little Rascals*.

Best about this evening was the Vienna Philharmonic, led by Daniel Harding (the young Englishman). The orchestra was in its full glory, and I had never heard Harding more commanding. He let the score have its breadth, eschewing the fast-fast tempos that many conductors now favor in Mozart. Seldom has *The Marriage of Figaro* seemed so symphonic to me. Harding brought out the music's nobility and greatness, in addition to its sparkle, mischief, and so on.

I must tell you that, when an especially cherished moment came, I did close my eyes: What was onstage was asinine and wrong; I thought it might be in part a favor to Mozart to close my eyes, and simply savor what he had created.

I don't wish to dwell on productions—there is little percentage, as I've said—but let me add one word: The director, Claus Guth, has apples on the stage, symbolizing temptation. Characters toss them to one another. Apples! The oldest symbol in the book (literally)! Yeah, that's visionary, all right. These hip transgressive modernists are surely several steps ahead of us squares.

Gautier Capuçon and Gabriela Montero have paired up (professionally). He is a young French cellist, the brother of the violinist Renaud, of whom he is sometimes the duo partner; she is the youngish Venezuelan pianist known for her improvisations. In the Grosser Saal of the Mozarteum, they played an all-Russian recital. It began with the Sonata No. 1 of Schnittke: a work that is bleak, harrowing, and terrifying, like much of Schnittke's output—like the Soviet Union. Halfway through, you're liable to think, "Might as well die now." This is a very well-made sonata, whose materials are few but sufficient. Capuçon played in masterly fashion: with care and conviction. Montero

supported him ably. (I don't mean to slight her role, but this is a very soloistic piece for the cello.)

And I'll tell you something funny: The sonata contrasted weirdly—jarringly—with the perfect weather we were having in Salzburg that evening. In fact, the entire city was radiating well-being and contentment, as it so often does. Never have I perceived a greater incongruity between music and surroundings.

From Schnittke, our duo went on to two famous and beloved sonatas, the Prokofiev and the Rachmaninoff. The Prokofiev is an extraordinarily enjoyable work. In many quarters now, “enjoyable” is a putdown, but it need not be, and should not be: Prokofiev made this piece to be enjoyed. As for the Rachmaninoff, it is one of the great Romantic sonatas for any instrument, despite some structural unwieldiness. Playing the Prokofiev, the young French cellist sounded quite Russian, complete with growls in his sound. And the pianist was both playful and *marcato*, as this sonata demands—as so much of Prokofiev demands. In the Rachmaninoff, she was natural and freewheeling, rather like the music itself. Capuçon was much the same. These two approach music with *gusto*—with relish—which is probably why they feel themselves kindred spirits.

The audience in the Grosser Saal responded with great enthusiasm, and the pair laid on three encores—one of which was an arrangement of Rachmaninoff's *Vocalise*, very nicely breathed. And I will provide a footnote—just an observation, of a socio-cultural nature: In America at some point, presenting organizations started giving flowers to boys—to men—at the end of an evening. Before, it was just girls. I remember Bryn Terfel in Carnegie Hall one night, mocking this new practice beautifully, plucking out a flower from his bouquet for his accompanist (male). Well, in Europe—in Salzburg, at least—it's still girls only.

Salzburg staged Handel's *Theodora*—an oratorio, not necessarily to be staged. But such stagings are the fashion now, or becoming so. We have entered a very visual and theatrical age. (There was even a staged song recital in Salzburg this season: by Patricia Petibon, a French soprano.) In Christof Loy's production of *Theodora*, “characters” do a lot of standing around while other people sing; they look at those singers with various dramatic expressions. It is all quite arty, artificial, to my mind. The soprano sings while being carried away (literally: in someone else's arms); the countertenor strips to his boxer shorts. And so on. To me, it's all unnecessary, and at times even a detraction, but others swear by what they regard as a “full realization.”

What is inarguable is that Salzburg had two of the finest singers in the world on that stage: Christine Schäfer and Bernarda Fink. (The latter is scandalously under-famous.) Was the Grosses Festspielhaus a little big—a little *gross*—for Schäfer's voice and technique? A little, maybe—but just a little. Bejun Mehta was the countertenor, and he sang with his usual intelligence and stylishness. Joseph Kaiser, a rising Canadian tenor, sang beautifully and earnestly. Not to be forgotten is Ivor Bolton, in the pit. He conducted the “Freiburgers”—the Freiburg Baroque Orchestra—and did so with clear expertise and commitment. Such leadership has the effect of making you, in the audience, committed too.

An evening of chamber music in the Mozarteum included a piano trio by Schumann—his first one, in D minor, Op. 63. The violinist onstage was Joshua Bell, the superstar from Indiana. He likes chamber music, and participates in it both skillfully and enthusiastically. I remember an all-~DVORAK evening in Carnegie Hall in particular. And he was absolutely sparkling in the Grosser Saal, throughout this Schumann. He was completely alive, musically, and that made the whole performance sort of quiver. The second movement had its wonderful little gallop. The violinist's sheer lyrical sensitivity in the slow movement was amazing. In the last movement, when the music turned to D major, it was as though the sun had come out. Again, this entire performance was fully alive.

I do not mean to suggest that the other two players were incidental—only that the violinist was key. The cellist, Steven Isserlis, did his part commendably, and so did the pianist, Dénes Várjon. He is from Hungary, and what a shocker: another good pianist from that country. They grow them there almost like they do goulash (if goulash could be grown).

The applause for the Schumann was not only robust but raucous, rowdy, and that is fairly rare for a chamber concert. The reaction was understandable, however. Of the dozen or so performances I heard in Salzburg this year, none was better than this.

A rarity occurred on the stage of the Grosses Festspielhaus: Anna Netrebko, the glamorous and excellent opera star, gave a recital. Her program was all-Russian, with Rimsky-Korsakov on the first half and Tchaikovsky on the second. These were “romances,” as we call Russian songs (not for entirely logical reasons). Netrebko performed very well. She was songful, rather than operatic, in her romances, but she was not in the least shy, and let out her sound when appropriate. Her native language and her timbre go together like a hand in a glove. I noticed a dog not barking: She never sharpened, as she frequently does in other languages, Italian in particular. Technically, she was very surefooted: She was confident, justifiably so, and that let you sit confidently in your seat. She sang very few bad notes. And she “sang clean”: that is, she traveled directly and accurately from note to note, rather than sliding, scooping, and so forth. Interpretively, she was very smart and, of course, personable. This is a very, very good native musician.

Accompanying her was Daniel Barenboim, the conductor-pianist (this night a pianist). He was at times tentative and awkward, but he was always attentive, caring, and creditable. He did some first-class playing in certain songs. Netrebko performed two encores, by the way—neither a Russian romance. The first was ~DVORAK’s “Songs My Mother Taught Me” (in Czech) and the second was that standard encore, Strauss’s “Cäcilie.” I had a memory, from years ago: In (New York’s) Alice Tully Hall, Olga Borodina, the Russian mezzo, sang a recital—all-Russian. She, too, offered two encores: “Ombra mai fu” and “Summertime.” Striking.

And here is a quick footnote, or second footnote: The Grosses during the Netrebko recital was sweltering and stifling, as on so many occasions. Everyone was fanning or mopping himself. Some years ago, in a public interview with me, the tenor Michael Schade said he was going to start a new political party in Austria: the Air-Conditioning Party.

Following Netrebko in the Grosses was Lang Lang, the young Chinese sensation. Let me say initially that he has the cockiest walk of anyone in music, or show business. He enters a stage as if owning not merely it and the hall, but all the world. Aprile Millo’s walk is humble by comparison—and she’s a soprano. The pianist began his recital with Schubert’s late A-major sonata, D. 959. Lang Lang, a Schubertian? Oh, yes. With his talent, he can be anything he wants, as long as his head is on relatively straight. He did a number of “wrong” things in the sonata—and maybe the quotation marks should be taken off that word. But he was never stupid or blatantly unfaithful. And his playing at large was extraordinarily beautiful. For example, no one does limpidity better than he.

To the second movement he applied a spooky clinical quality that I had never heard—highly effective. In the Scherzo, he was admirably moderate in tempo, though he could play this music as fast as anyone. In his hands, the Scherzo was unusually *grazioso*. Only at the beginning of the last movement was his *rubato* really harmful—and he soon got on track, letting the music flow.

His gestures, while at the keyboard, can be off-putting: his gyrations, his flutterings, his self-conducting. What you might do is remind yourself that music is an aural art: Close your eyes, and how does the music sound? That is how you must judge.

Later in the recital, Lang Lang played an assortment of preludes by Debussy. Some of them were absurd—absurdly interpreted (“La fille aux cheveux de lin”)—and some of them were exquisite and

marvelous (“La cathédrale engloutie”). As we have long known, Lang Lang is a master colorist. And for him, a Steinway is a toy, an expensive and rewarding plaything. He ended his printed program with Chopin’s “Heroic” Polonaise. I have long written, and lamented, how changeable, how inconsistent, Lang Lang is: a mess one day (or moment), a world-beater the next. Late last season in New York, I heard him play this polonaise and wreck it. In Salzburg, he was thrilling in it: both suave and noble. And one thing could not be clearer: No one has ever had more fun playing the piano than Lang Lang.

Most musicians will play an encore or encores at the drop of a hat, almost without being asked—Lang Lang made his audience beg for one, and they finally got Liszt’s *Liebestraum* (the most famous of the three). It was breathtakingly beautiful, is all I can say.

To end, one more Mozart opera, and one more Salzburg production—this one also by Claus Guth. He has given his treatment to *Così fan tutte*. The former *Così* in Salzburg, directed by the Hermanns, Karl-Ernst and Ursel, featured badminton and a giant rock onstage (or was it an egg?). Also the continuo player: He, too, sat onstage, and interacted with the characters. Guth’s *Così* is slick, sleek, and “up-to-date,” reminding some patrons of *Sex in the City*. The girls live in that kind of apartment or home, and they are that kind of girl: boozing it up, etc. Mozart meets the hook-up culture. The maid Despina bops around listening to her iPod, and she does something vulgar with a bottle of liquid between her legs. I could go on.

In modern fashion, there is plenty of video in this production, which I think distracts, and detracts, from the opera: its music and other old-fashioned, pre-Guth elements. You may feel you are watching television rather than experiencing an opera. A pander to the MTV generation? Also, Guth likes to have characters—he does this in *Figaro*, too—engage in coordinated gestures and movements, like the Pips behind Gladys Knight (only not as smooth). This is incredibly tedious and tacky.

As you might imagine, I could knock this production until the cows come home—but, but: However much I dislike this kind of production, and believe it does a disservice to Mozart, it is an excellent production of its type. Allow me a culinary analogy: You may dislike veal piccata—want nothing to do with it—but you would acknowledge a top-notch veal piccata made by a chef.

A word about the singers, a few of them? Salzburg’s cast was young, slim, and good-looking, reflecting the opera world’s new emphasis on the visual. Miah Persson was Fiordiligi, and she is a capable singer, but she did unfortunate things to “Come scoglio,” that great aria: It was oddly lax and irresolute from her throat. Isabel Leonard was Dorabella, and this young mezzo from New York continues her dazzling ascent. The aforementioned Patricia Petibon was smashing as Despina, both in her singing and in her acting (however much you may have objected to the direction). The veteran baritone Bo Skovhus was Don Alfonso: suave and cynical, yes—but also sinister. Seldom will you see such a sinister Alfonso, and Skovhus created chills.

I might mention, almost offhandedly, that there was no Italian in this cast—not a native Italian-speaker. Did it make a difference? A small one, yes. Sometimes you simply long to hear native Italian, especially in an extended and rather talky opera, such as a Mozart-Da Ponte one.

The Vienna Philharmonic, under Adam Fischer, did its job, and so did Fischer. Providing continuo was the impressive pianist and all-around musician Bradley Moore, a young American. He and his harpsichord were in the pit, not onstage. How conventional, almost fuddy-duddy, for Salzburg.

Jay Nordlinger is a Senior Editor at *National Review*, writing on a variety of subjects.

[more from this author](#)

This article originally appeared in The New Criterion, Volume 28 October 2009, on page 55

Copyright © 2012 The New Criterion | www.newcriterion.com

<http://www.newcriterion.com/articles.cfm/Salzburg-chronicle-4291>