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Salzburg chronicle

by Jay Nordlinger

Coverage of this year's Salzburg Festival, including The Magic Flute, and Carmen.

At this year's Salzburg Festival, they staged *The Magic Flute*, which is normal—Salzburg is Mozart's town, and the festival is rightly devoted to him. But they staged *Das Labyrinth* too, which is not normal. This opera, virtually lost to time, is a sequel to *The Magic Flute*—not by Mozart, I hasten to say, but by Peter Winter (whose name sometimes gets a "von"). More about all this in a moment.

The Magic Flute was given an unusual production. We were looking at some medical clinic, or asylum, or other institution. People stood around in white coats, making notes on clipboards. The Three Boys were little old men, looking like Montgomery Burns from *The Simpsons*. Had some experiment gone awry? At the end of the opera, Sarastro and the Queen of the Night wrestled on the floor, in a great struggle. No doubt the stage director, Jens-Daniel Herzog, was communicating important things. But I liked the line of a friend of mine, afterward: "Close your eyes and think of Mozart."

I actually did that once! It was at the Salzburg Festival, several years ago, and the opera was *The Marriage of Figaro*. The production was so bizarre and wrongheaded as to be ruinous—ruinous of Mozart's opera (and Da Ponte's). When a part I especially cherish came along, I closed my eyes. I did not want the action on the stage to spoil the sublime moment. I did not do this in some showy, self-conscious way: "Ha, I'm closing my eyes!" It was completely natural.

Conducting this year's *Flute* was Nikolaus Harnoncourt, wise and humane. You want a wise and humane conductor for *The Magic Flute*, maybe above all other operas. Harnoncourt is famous for his slow tempos in Mozart. But it should be said that some of his tempos are faster than the standard ones. I had never heard so brisk an "Ach, ich fühl's"—and the aria was better off for it. Normally, the orchestra one is conducting at the Salzburg Festival is the Vienna Philharmonic. But in the pit for *Flute* was the Concentus Musicus Wien, founded by Harnoncourt and his wife Alice in—can you believe it?—1953.

The opera had some first-rate singing in it. Bernard Richter was Tamino, fresh-voiced, surefooted, Polenzani-like. Julia Kleiter was Pamina, totally Pamina-like. She is a singer of intelligence, beauty, and class. Markus Werba was Papageno, as he has been before at this festival. He was, as before, charismatic and endearing. If you're curious, he is the grandnephew of Erik Werba, one of the outstanding accompanists of the last century.

Mozart died in 1791, the year of *The Magic Flute*. Later in the decade, his librettist, Emanuel Schikaneder, wrote a sequel to the opera: *Das Labyrinth*. Mozart being unavailable, he needed another composer. Talk about a tough act to follow. Peter Winter accepted. He was a German, born in 1754 (two years before Mozart) and dying in 1825 (a full thirty-four years after Mozart). How is Winter's score? First of all, no fair comparing. Second, it is a creditable score, and enjoyable. I might object that the opera is too long. But then—I don't mean to shock you—there are some who consider *The Magic Flute* maybe a hair too long.

Salzburg staged *Das Labyrinth* outdoors, in the Residenzhof: a beautiful setting, with church bells occasionally making their contributions. The production (Alexandra Liedtke, director) was very *Magic Flute*-like, I would say: a glorified Punch and Judy show, a *Singspiel* through and through. No white coats or clipboards. I found the production refreshing, rather than old-fashioned. You should have seen the birdy children, younger siblings of Papageno! There was a worrisome aspect, however: a bit of a minstrel show surrounding Monostatos, the Moor. I am not one to be squeamish about political incorrectness. But I must say my American sensibility was jarred.

Ivor Bolton conducted the Mozarteum Orchestra et al. He was commanding and stylish. Also enthusiastic—and an infectious enthusiasm is a key quality for a conductor. Among the many singers, I will cite two of the best: Michael Schade and Thomas Tatzl. The former was Tamino, as he has long been in the first opera, Mozart's, and he was at his most secure. As for Tatzl, he is a young Austrian bass-baritone, with a beautiful voice and a ton of personality. He's also "a handsome Joe," as my grandmother would say. That never hurts a career.

One of the themes of the festival this year was "Über die Grenze," or "Over the Border"—meaning the border between Austria and the Czech lands. Accordingly, a chamber concert one night brought music of Dvorák, Janácek, Suk, and Martinu. The Suk piece was his Piano Quartet in A minor, Op. 1. It is a very good opus one—written when the composer was seventeen. This was the same age at which Bizet wrote his Symphony in C. Mendelssohn did them one better, writing his immortal Octet at sixteen. I pause now to remember a popular song from the 1940s, "Opus One": "Oh, baby, I'm rackin' my brain, to think of a name / To give to this tune, so Perry can croon / And maybe old Bing will give it a fling / And that'll start everyone hummin' the thing."

The Janácek piece was his sonata for violin and piano, played by Joshua Bell and Dénes Várjon. To concentrate on Bell: He knows how to slip into the clothes of music, any music, grasping its essential nature. He did that here. He was particularly good in his rhythm: arresting. Throughout

the sonata, he played with fantastic intensity. His bow was almost on fire. He played as though his life depended on it. He played as though nothing in the world were more important. In my experience, Bell does not phone in his performances. He makes each one count. Not every superstar does this. Frankly, neither do the non-superstars.

In the Kollegienkirche, the church of the University of Salzburg, there was a series called "Salzburg contemporary." That is an interesting word, "contemporary." What does it mean, exactly? One program in the series had Stravinsky's *Dumbarton Oaks* concerto, written in 1938. It had an even earlier work, actually: a suite by Hanns Eisler, from 1932. Rachmaninoff had not even written his *Rhapsody on a Theme by Paganini* then. Would Romantic-sounding works composed last week qualify as "contemporary"? I believe the word is more a state of mind than anything else. Perhaps it is even a conceit, sometimes.

The particular program I have mentioned, with Stravinsky and Eisler, had three works by Bernd Alois Zimmermann, the Swiss composer who lived from 1918 to 1970. Zimmermann had a good year in Salzburg: The festival also staged his opera, *Die Soldaten*. One of the Zimmermann works heard in the Kollegienkirche was *Un petit rien*, a little and light piece, as its name tells you, but not exactly a *rien*, not exactly a nothing. It is in seven parts. The first is Tchaikovsky-like, sprinkled in fairy dust, with a touch of *The Threepenny Opera*. A later one is marked "*Pas trop militaire*" —possibly a unique marking, and a perfectly apt one. The last part is called "Boogie-Woogie au clair de lune," a delight.

Also on the program was a piece by Ligeti, drawn from his lark of an opera, *Le Grand macabre*. This is *Mysteries of the Macabre*, completely wacky, like a cartoon accompaniment. The aforementioned Eisler suite comes from *Kuhle Wampe*, a Bertolt Brecht movie (seeing as I have mentioned *The Threepenny Opera*). The music here is offbeat, clever, winning. In my view, Eisler was one of those composers who wasted their talents in the service of Communism. Do you know Eisler composed the East German national anthem? What a credential.

I ought to mention who did the performing in this concert: the Klangforum Wien, a chamber orchestra, conducted by Johannes Kalitzke. They were skillful and spirited. Their concert, as you can tell, had whimsy and fun. Contemporary music—however we define "contemporary"—need not be eat-your-peas.

Return now to the opera house, for *Ariadne auf Naxos*. We are in the centennial year of that opera. The three best-known founders of the Salzburg Festival were involved in *Ariadne*'s creation: Richard Strauss, the composer; Hugo von Hofmannsthal, the librettist; and Max Reinhardt, the director. In 1912, *Ariadne* was a hybrid, and quite long: It began with a play, an adaptation by Hofmannsthal of Molière's *Bourgeois gentilhomme*, with incidental music by Strauss; then came the opera proper, you might say. This did not sit well with the public. So, Strauss and Hofmanns-thal got back to work, fashioning the *Ariadne* we know today.

Salzburg staged the original—but with a twist: Hofmannsthal's adaptation of Molière was adapted to include Hofmannsthal himself, as a character. If I have understood correctly, this was done by the production's director, Sven-Eric Bechtolf. The purpose of this new opening play was to shed light on how the original work came about, those one hundred years ago. A good idea: and nicely executed. Onstage was a cast of very able actors, including Peter Matic, the major-domo. He is a canny old pro from Vienna, and was a treat to watch.

Speaking of Vienna, the resident orchestra, the VPO, was in the pit. Conducting was Daniel Harding, who was knowledgeable, alert, and "committed." What does it mean to be "committed"? This is one of those intangible qualities, but no less evident for that. I will mention just one of the singers: Emily Magee, the soprano in the title role. The pride of Walden, New York, she was warm, strong, and lovable, as an Ariadne should be. As for the show as a whole: an unusual piece of lyric theater, interesting and beautiful to look at and listen to. Whether Reinhardt would have approved, I can't say for sure. But I think so.

Back to the chamber hall, for a concert by the Trio Zimmermann. An ensemble named after the Swiss composer? No, after the German violinist who heads it, Frank Peter Zimmermann. His sidekicks are a violist, Antoine Tamestit, and a cellist, Christian Poltéra. I have called them "sidekicks," in part because Zimmermann is so famous, and in part to be a little flip. In reality, the three men are equal partners in the music-making.

They began their program with Schubert, and they began perfectly together, a good sign. Indeed, they stayed together for the rest of the evening, playing with musicality as well. The Schubert in question was a B-flat trio, D. 471, though Schubert composed only one movement of this work: He had that habit, leaving works unfinished. They then played the string trio of Schoenberg, Op. 45. In this work, Schoenberg describes a terrible medical episode he had—a cardiac arrest. It is said that Mahler put his (irregular) heartbeat in his Ninth Symphony. Schoenberg puts a lot more than that in his trio.

At any rate—heart rate?—it takes certain abilities to play this work. You have to have tension, sustained tension, even in very quiet parts. There must be nervousness, anxiety. Trauma, of course. Clarity, precision, logic. Some of the primitive. The Trio Zimmermann came through, in every respect. Theirs was an account both dramatic and—this is somewhat hard to describe—coolly musical.

After intermission, they played the earliest work on the program: Mozart's Divertimento in E flat, K. 563. I have long been skeptical of playing these divertimentos in concert halls, because they were meant to be played on social occasions, often outdoors, as people milled about and did whatever else they did. In any case, musicians can't resist. And the Trio Zimmermann can be forgiven, because they played so well. To single out a movement, the Adagio was unhurried, but not without momentum—an important trick. To single out another one, the closing Allegro was Schubertian (if you will indulge an anachronism): sunny, sweet, matter-of-fact, and gemütlich.

(Maybe I should say that Schubert was Mozartean?)

A Handel opera, *Tamerlano*, was given a concert performance. There are nights when everyone in a cast, even a large cast, sings really well. This was one of those nights. There were two countertenors, Bejun Mehta and Franco Fagioli. There was a soprano, Julia Lezhneva, the young Russian. There was a mezzo-soprano, previously unknown to me: Marianne Crebassa, a Frenchwoman. She's known to me now. After she finished an aria, a fellow singer onstage, Michael Volle, applauded her. I couldn't blame him. Volle is a German baritone, and I have noted something in previous dispatches from Salzburg: He looks like Beethoven, I swear.

There was a tenor in the cast too: Plácido Domingo. Ladies and gentlemen, I have run out of words. For at least fifteen years, I have referred to him as "the ageless Spaniard." He isn't getting any less ageless, so to speak. In *Tamerlano*, he sang glowingly, energetically, and, get this, correctly—with very little Romantic sliding around. Also, he sang *loud*: The voice was not only beautiful—its customary self—it was *big*, filling the hall, filling your ears. I don't know what else to say: a sort of miracle, Domingo is.

The orchestra in the pit—or rather, on the stage, behind the singers—was Les Musiciens du Louvre Grenoble (they started out in Paris, then moved to Grenoble), under their founder and leader, Marc Minkowski. What I have said about Bolton and Harding is true of Minkowski too: commanding, stylish, knowledgeable, committed.

A few nights later, Riccardo Muti led the Vienna Philharmonic. Last summer, he announced that he would do no more operas in Salzburg: too time-consuming. But he will do concerts, and this one consisted of Liszt and Berlioz. It began with a late Liszt tone poem, almost completely unknown: *Von der Wiege bis zum Grabe* (*From the Cradle to the Grave*). It is a lovely and interesting piece, very late-Liszt. Muti conducted it with care and zero fussiness. Then he turned to one of Liszt's hits, *Les Préludes*. As usual in this piece—and many pieces—he was taut and strong, allowing as little blowsiness and bombast as possible. The ending was exciting, making you really sit up.

On the second half of the program, we got the *Messe solennelle* of Berlioz. What, the Requiem? No, kind of a practice requiem, a practice oratorio, which the composer wrote when he was twenty. Then he destroyed it. So, why do we have it? Apparently, there was a copy on the loose, and it was discovered in 1991 by a Belgian schoolteacher, poking around an organ loft. It is an amazing story. Let me now ask a question: Does it do a service to Berlioz to have unearthed this piece and to perform it? I don't know. It is of greater musicological interest than musical interest. It is, I'm afraid, a snoozeroo. But it is Berlioz, and Berlioz is an important composer. And the piece was given a near-faultless reading by Muti and his forces. Those forces included two solo singers: Julia Kleiter (of *Magic Flute* fame) and Saimir Pirgu, the Albanian tenor.

Offering a recital was Matthias Goerne, the German baritone, accompanied by Christoph Eschenbach, the German pianist (and conductor). A few years ago, I swore off Goerne-Eschenbach recitals. In Salzburg, I went back to the well. Why? For more than one reason, but probably the most important was that they are very talented musicians, no matter what. Why had I sworn off them? Mainly because they are prone to preciousness and its close cousin, pretentiousness. They also suffer from what I once dubbed Elly Ameling Syndrome: the condition of being beautifully boring (although that soprano could be great as well).

Goerne and Eschenbach began their Salz-burg recital with Beethoven—the *Gellert* songs. The first one, "Bitten," was overly languid, without spine. What a surprise. (Pardon my sarcasm.) But there is no more beautiful voice than Goerne's, and out of no one's mouth does German sound more beautiful. A later song, "Vom Tode," was allowed to breathe and move, a blessing. But in the closing song, "Busslied," the performers were back to their old tricks: swooning and ritarding all over the place, warping the music.

The first half of the program had two other sets—the *Gesänge des Harfners* of Schubert and the *Vier ernste Gesänge* of Brahms. The musicians performed the three sets one after another, with no break, no applause, as though the sets belonged together. This is an increasingly common practice in the music world, and nonsense. In any event, let me mention one moment in one Brahms song: the line "O Tod, wie wohl tust du dem Dürftigen." This is one of the greatest moments in the entire song literature. And Goerne absolutely killed it, by making a Very Big Deal out of it. He would have been so much better off just singing it. Brahms has written the sublimity in.

After intermission, it was a dozen or so more Brahms songs. Goerne spent much of the time luxuriating in the sound of his voice, at the expense of the music. Eschenbach does little to rein him in; he aids and abets him. Say what you will about Eschenbach's guilt or innocence, it's hard to blame Goerne: If we sounded like that, we'd luxuriate in our voices too! Honestly, it must be one of the most beautiful voices in the history of man.

I did not attend the opening night of the *Carmen*—but I heard about it. I heard that the singer in the title role, Magdalena Kožená, was booed. Why? Because she was utterly unsuited to the role, a fish out of water, not smoky enough, not Gypsy enough, not sexy enough. I also heard that the conductor, Sir Simon Rattle, was booed. Why? Because he conducted too limp a *Carmen*. I could believe the criticisms, both of Kožená and of Rattle. When I attended *Carmen*, however, I found the singer and the conductor praiseworthy.

Carmen is a role that can be taken by a variety of women: sopranos and mezzo-sopranos, vamps and less obvious types, Slavs, Americans, Scandinavians—lots of women. You don't have to be Conchita Supervia to sing Carmen. Bizet's Gypsy admits of numerous interpretations and sensibilities. You certainly don't have to slut it up. On the night I attended, Kožená was stylish and intelligent, both in her singing and in her acting. My chief complaint was that she was small-voiced, simply not producing the desired volume. But was she a Carmen? Oh, yes. Is she the last

word in the role? Don't be silly. Moreover, no one is the last word (not even Conchita).

I will get to Sir Simon in a moment. The Don José, Jonas Kaufmann, was also small-voiced (as he was when singing Bacchus, in *Ariadne auf Naxos*). And, unlike Kožená, he is not at home in the French language, to put it mildly. But he is a tenor of many gifts, and I will tell you something about the Flower Song: He sang a genuine *piano* on the high B flat toward the end. You almost never hear that. Micaëla was sung by Genia Kühmeier, a local girl, a Salzburger. After Opening Night, a singer told me, "The opera should have been called *Micaëla*!" Kühmeier was good indeed: sweet and strong, simultaneously. The Escamillo, I'm afraid, was negligible.

Sir Simon and the Vienna Philharmonic performed with knowledge, confidence, and affection (not affectation). I don't know about you, but I have never much liked Micaëla's aria. I have always found it a weak spot in the score. But I very much liked Sir Simon's tempo in it, brisk. Maybe other performers need to move it along? *Carmen* can resemble a flute concerto, and the VPO's principal, Karl-Heinz Schütz, played splendidly. Also doing starry turns were the French horn, Manuel Huber, and the cello, Robert Nagy.

The production was in the hands of a choreographer, Aletta Collins, and, as you might have expected, this *Carmen* was full of dancing. I could pick at the production, as you always can—I have a little list. But here was a wonderful touch: the people lining up to buy tickets for the bullfight. They were all different, they were all interesting, and they looked fantastic together. A triumph of a tableau. I'd like to see it again.

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His podcast with *The New Criterion*, titled "Music for a While," can be found here.

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