The New Criterion

Music October 2008

Salzburg chronicle

by Jay Nordlinger

On the 2008 Salzburg Festival.

Every year, the Salzburg Festival has a "theme"—it doesn't mean much to ordinary festivalgoers, but it seems to mean something to Salzburg administration. And this year, the theme was "… for love is strong as death," drawn from Song of Solomon. The idea was to choose operas in which love and death play prominent roles. That didn't exactly narrow it down, did it?

The operas for Summer '08 included *Don Giovanni* (Mozart), *Rusalka* (Dvořák), *Bluebeard's Castle* (Bartók), and *Otello* (Verdi). Some of the productions were dreadful and repulsive; some of them were fine, or better. I will get to productions shortly—but since stage directors are always trying to overshadow singers, conductors, and orchestra players (not to mention composers and librettists), let's start with some performers. And we will consider only those who did very well, leaving others behind, perhaps to lick their wounds.

Don Giovanni brought some excellent Mozart singers—indeed, a couple of singers who may prove historic. One of them was Dorothea Röschmann, the soprano portraying Donna Elvira. Sometimes, when I hear her, the P-word comes to mind: perfect. And that is not a word to treat lightly. Not far behind her, if behind at all, is Matthew Polenzani, the tenor who portrayed Don Ottavio. This is a lucky age for lyric tenors, and Polenzani is prominent in the pack.

Salzburg also offered *The Magic Flute* (again, Mozart), in which another fabulous Mozart tenor starred: Michael Schade. His voice seems to be changing now, perhaps less sweet and youthful than it was. That is only natural. And this voice retains considerable beauty while projecting strength. Schade might be called a masculine Mozart singer, while still plenty refined. In addition, he's a better actor than the "good enough for opera" kind. The Pamina beside him (for he was Tamino, of course) was Genia Kühmeier, Salzburg's own. That is, she's a local girl—and a first-class Mozartean.

I cite a single specific from the performance I heard. Toward the end of *The Magic Flute*, Pamina sings, "Tamino mein! O welch ein Glück!" And Tamino responds in kind. From Kühmeier and

Schade, this exchange was ravishing, while not the least precious.

Rusalka was conducted by Franz Welser-Möst, the music director of the Cleveland Orchestra. And the Cleveland Orchestra was there too, in fact—the first time it had been in an opera pit in a long, long while. There was some grumbling from the Vienna Philharmonic about this—the VPO is Salzburg's resident band. Someone was heard to crack, "We have more Czech grandmothers in our orchestra than they do in theirs"—meaning, there are more grandsons of Czechs in the VPO than in the Cleveland Orchestra. The gang from Ohio responded, "Don't be so sure about that"—and they were quite right. (Besides, claims for nationality in music-making are often bunk.)

At any rate, the Clevelanders played very well, with color, accuracy, and flair. Welser-Möst kept a sure, fluid hand over all. And there was a laudable soprano in Dvořaacute;k's title role: Camilla Nylund, a Finn. She displayed a glorious vocal freedom, especially on high notes. And she obviously enjoys her singing, an enjoyment the audience catches. She had at her side Piotr Beczala, who sang the Prince. A Polish tenor, he is another one—another in the lyric pack with Schade and Polenzani.

Bluebeard's Castle has only two singers—and they'd better be good. They were. She (Judith) was Michelle DeYoung, the American mezzo; he (Bluebeard) was Falk Struckmann, the German bass-baritone. They were technically secure, vocally inviting, interpretively idiomatic, and convincing. There is not a lot more to ask. And leading this affair in the pit was Peter Eötvös, a Hungarian conductor and composer, who clearly knew what he was doing.

In the pit for *Otello* was Riccardo Muti—and he, too, knew what he was doing. Even his detractors have always given him his Verdi. *Otello* was brash, tense, tender, exciting, and all the other things we need it to be (and Verdi needs it to be). Seldom has this opera been so *orchestral*. The orchestra (the VPO) was loud, and too loud. Singers were rather slighted in these proceedings—and there was at least one listener, namely me, who cared not a whit. The Muti-VPO *Otello* was thrilling.

But the singers weren't nothing (for *Otello* is an opera, after all, although it sounded more like a dramatic symphony). The soprano Marina Poplavskaya was Desdemona, and a pleasing one—a Slavic one, or a Russian one; but a pleasing one. And here's another lyric tenor who belongs to the privileged pack: Stephen Costello, a young American, who made a lasting impression in the smallish role of Cassio.

On the productions, I will not dwell long—for they could take up all our space, demanding to be reported and decried. *Don Giovanni*, directed by Claus Guth, takes place in the woods. Giovanni and Leporello appear to be camping (and, in opera, we're used to a different kind of camp). Donna Anna is the sexual aggressor, of course—this is typical in today's productions, rendering the libretto nonsensical. Suddenly, a bus station (or something) appears in the middle of the woods. Donna Elvira is waiting in it with a valise. Later, Anna and Don Ottavio drive around in a car (still in the woods). As Ottavio sings, "Dalla sua pace," Giovanni and Anna make out (or

something) in the car.

Etc., etc. The point is, the production and the opera don't match. The director has wrenched the opera away from the com- poser and librettist. For example, Mozart and Da Ponte tend to be subtle, sly; this director tends to be crude, blatant. Really, it's enough to make you see red. Why should Dorothea Röschmann—a great Mozart soprano—have to waste her career tramping around in some egotist's woods in high heels?

Rusalka was another travesty. Directed by Jossi Wieler and Sergio Morabito, it takes place in what looks like a New Orleans bordello, which is fine. There are several commendable touches in this production. You will not find a moon, however, when Rusalka sings her "Song to the Moon"—that'd be "too much like right," as my old southern friend would say. In Salzburg, you don't get a rainbow bridge at the end of *Das Rheingold* (first installment of Wagner's *Ring*). Instead, you get a blank white wall. A moon in *Rusalka* and a rainbow bridge in *Das Rheingold* are what modernists call "clichés." To others, they are more like fundamentals.

But forget a moon, or its absence: The main problem is that, again, the opera and the production don't match. The opera, particularly its score, is enchanting, fantastic. And the production is unrelievedly ugly—ugly in every way: physically, mentally, spiritually. The Christian cross is a sinister symbol, as it is in so many modern productions (of various operas). For example, there is an ugly one in the Prince's palace: bare, stark, and neon. As Rusalka faces it, she is surrounded by a male mob, and it appears that she is gang-raped.

Anyway, enough. It so happened that, during Salzburg '08, the conductor Lorin Maazel (working elsewhere) gave an interview. In it, he blasted Salzburg and its productions: "weirdly provocative stagings by arrogant directors who think that innovation means boring the audience using public funds." He added that "often these directors are simply uneducated." Tell 'em, Lorin.

Bluebeard's Castle was rather interesting. The production of Johan Simons has Bluebeard in a wheelchair and Judith as his nurse. (At least she's dressed that way.) There are no doors—that would be like having a moon in *Rusalka* or a rainbow bridge in *Das Rheingold*. Judith dominates Bluebeard, pushing him around (often literally). Is she a Nurse Ratched? Unlike in a normal production, it is Bluebeard who cowers, not Judith—until she gets it, in the end, as she must. Many patrons and critics objected to what Simons did, and they were not in the least wrong. But I say: *Bluebeard* is a largely psychological opera, anyway. What happens onstage is almost incidental. And Simons was neither uninteresting nor ruinous nor a joke.

Otello was in the care of Stephen Langridge, director son of the English tenor Philip Langridge. And his production is a fairly rare bird: an intelligent modern production. (You might say the same of Simons's *Bluebeard*, but Bartók's opera is a modern one anyway—despite having been written almost a hundred years ago!) A fellow critic is always bugging me, "Jay, there's a middle ground between the 'traditional' and Euro-trash." I respond, "Sure, but how often do we see it?" And you

see it in this *Otello*.

Each season, the Salzburg Festival Society stages public interviews of prominent musicians (which interviews are conducted by your chronicler and correspondent). In '08, we had two maestros—Welser-Möst and Mariss Jansons—and three singers. Let's give the singers a little time in the spotlight (since they're unused to the spotlight, poor babies). All three gave us a fascinating and rich hour. But, owing to limited space, I will relate just a morsel from each.

Michelle DeYoung was first up. She is a frequent Fricka (in Wagner's *Ring* cycle). And I said to her, "Tell us about your girl Fricka." She smiled and nodded. "Is she as bad as all that? She's always painted as a shrew, a prude, a killjoy." DeYoung answered, "Actually, she's right. She is the only who sees clearly. And she pleads with Wotan to see clearly, too." Just so.

With Matthew Polenzani, I was talking about the late Pavarotti. "How did he sing so lyrically," I asked, "while producing all that sound?" Polenzani shook his head and said, "I don't know. If I did, I'd do it, trust me." I then recalled to him my favorite bit of golf commentary, all time—knowing he would like it, because he is a devoted, almost daily, golfer. One year at the Masters, Tom Weiskopf—a golf champion of the day—was providing commentary in the booth. Jack Nicklaus was on the tee. A sportscaster said to Weiskopf, "What's going through Jack's mind right now?" Weiskopf answered, "I have no idea. If I did, I might have won this tournament a time or two."

The soprano Barbara Bonney (another golfer) has dealt with her share of dippy or demented stage directors. In Strauss's *Rosenkavalier*, one of them asked her to sing the Presentation of the Rose with her back to the audience. Bonney, incredulous, said, "It's hard enough to make yourself heard when you're facing the audience." Sometimes, when it comes to stage direction, you can only shake your head—and hope for a saner era.

Alongside the operas (and interviews), there were many concerts and recitals. Shall we have a sampling? Riccardo Muti led the VPO—and the Vienna State Opera Chorus—in Brahms's Requiem. The VPO sound is virtually built for Brahms: warm, generous, glowing, sometimes growling. And the Vienna chorus is well suited, too. But Maestro Muti, regrettably—on the morning I have in mind—did not have his best outing. He did some admirable things, to be sure. But too often he was turgid, unnatural, or pedestrian.

There were two Polish pianists who gave recitals—one a senior musician, one a newcomer. The senior musician was Krystian Zimerman, who played Bach and Beethoven on his first half, and two countrymen on his second. The Bach was the Partita in C minor, and the Beethoven—staying in the same key—was the "Pathétique" Sonata. Very few people can sing on a piano like Zimerman. And very few people have his refinement and taste. He is guilty of some errors, such as rushing in faster pieces or sections. But his virtues greatly outweigh them.

His first Polish piece was the Sonata No. 2 by Grazyna Bacewicz, who lived from 1909 to 1969. This lady was a violinist and a pianist, as well as a composer (who studied with Boulanger in Paris). The Sonata No. 2 is not a neglected masterpiece, I'm afraid. But its slow movement—a Largo—is lovely. Zimerman's second Polish piece was early Szymanowski: the Variations on a Polish Folk Theme, Op. 10. This, too, is not a masterpiece—but it has moments of genuine inspiration, including a nifty funeral march.

Zimerman capped his recital with an encore, Brahms's Intermezzo in B minor. This is a mysterious dream of a piece, which Zimerman—with his *cantabile*, his sensitivity, and his imagination—seems born to play.

The young Pole was Rafal Blechacz, born in 1985—winner of the Chopin Competition in 2005. They say he is a wunderkind, and they are not wrong. Blechacz takes evident delight in playing, and he makes you grin along with him. He is slim, slight, handsome, boyish—with tousled hair. He often tucks into a piece like a hungry tiger. He offered a mixed program, the kind that instrumentalists play when they're first starting out—too bad they discontinue the practice (usually). He went through Bach, Liszt, Debussy, and Chopin. He has fabulous fingers, for sure. But what he sometimes lacks is just what Zimerman has—even specializes in: *cantabile*. Will that come in time? Perhaps. Just about the best playing he did all night was in his final encore—Chopin's Waltz in C-sharp minor. Young Blechacz reminded you why the piece became popular in the first place.

Christine Schäfer sang a recital—a program of German art songs, by Bach, Mahler, and Wolf. This was a Schwarzkopfian program. And Schäfer, in various respects, is a Schwarzkopfian singer. She did not sing perfectly on this evening. Why would I say such a thing? Because she—believe it or not—is capable of singing perfectly, as she has shown us many times. She had some poor intonation, some impurity, some botches. Worse, she was sometimes indifferent—unmoved and unmoving—in these songs. But look: She is still Christine Schäfer. And, as I remarked afterward, I'd rather hear her on an off night than I would most others on their very best one.

The Cleveland Orchestra, in addition to its services in *Rusalka*, played three concerts, one of which had Mitsuko Uchida, the pianist, as soloist. She played Bartók's Concerto No. 3—his "Mozart concerto," or "neo-Classical concerto." She did so tidily and ably. And Franz Welser-Möst matched her nicely. He had not been so fine in the opening work of the concert: Dvořák's "New World" Symphony. It's not so much that the performance was bad as that it was indifferent (to return to that word). Nothing special. And you don't travel to Salzburg and play an ultra-familiar symphony while doing nothing special. But the Dvořák was made up for later, not just by the Bartók, but—even more—by Berg's Three Pieces for Orchestra. These pieces had all their mystery, wonder, and strangeness. We were truly breathing the air of different planets.

I can't resist giving just one morsel from the Welser-Möst interview. We were talking about youth on the podium—the new desire for, even madness for. People are saying, "Give us a young

conductor—no more of these fogeys." Welser-Möst quickly labeled this "a sickness of our time." And that is perfectly stated.

Leading the Vienna Philharmonic in another concert was another interviewee: Mariss Jansons, that superb musician from Latvia. This program began with Webern's *In the Summer Wind*, subtitled "Idyll for Large Orchestra." The piece represents Webern before he became Webern, so to speak. It is dreamily Romantic, and the VPO played it just that way. Seldom have you heard such beautiful and ethereal string sounds. The music seemed to float on air—and Jansons shaped it unerringly. Then came a soloist, Elīna Garanča, the young mezzo-soprano and Jansons's fellow Latvian. She sang *Les Nuits d'été*, the cycle by Berlioz. And she was smoky, sultry, sensuous—altogether delicious. She especially enjoyed those French words and syllables, as a singer must.

The concert ended with the Second Symphony of Brahms. I have said that the VPO is built for Brahms, and it's true. But this performance was more than an aural bath (which perhaps would have been enough). Jansons made sure that the music was clearly etched, as well as rich. This was a performance—indeed, a concert—that stayed with me for days after, which is rare, I can tell you. I don't know how much the top ticket was—350 euros? Even if it was that high, it was worth it.

Far be it from me to venture into theater criticism—others are plenty capable of that. But I did attend Vanessa Redgrave's one-woman show, *The Year of Magical Thinking*. This is the play based on Joan Didion's memoir of loss. Redgrave is widely—well-nigh universally—regarded as one of the greatest actresses of our time. I had never seen her onstage, and did not miss the opportunity. So, if she's so great (which I trust she is)—why was she so stilted, awkward, and self-conscious? Why could you never forget—or why could *I* never forget—that she was acting, even for one second? Why could one never become absorbed in the character or play? I felt like I was observing a drama queen rather than an actress. And, attempting an American accent, she sounded like a person for whom English—any kind of English—was a foreign language. Perhaps I caught her on an unrepresentative night. In any case, she is beautiful, no doubt.

After the play, Redgrave and the Salzburg Festival's artistic director, Jürgen Flimm, did a reading. What did they read? Why, "Poems from Guantánamo"—i.e., verses penned by terror detainees held by the American government. Some people say that Europe is finished. On some days, it's hard to disagree with them.

But you don't have disturbing thoughts in Salzburg for long—it is an amazingly beautiful place whose amazing beauty fadeth not. I asked Barbara Bonney, long a Salzburg resident, whether she ever tires of it. She said not a chance. And every year, I discover byways and buildings and views that had somehow escaped my notice, in many previous visits. One of my favorite moments this year occurred not in a concert hall or opera house—but as I was walking one morning, and heard the rehearsal of an Agnus Dei from upper windows. Music seemed all the more penetrating then!

And have I told you about Camp Bartók? I don't think so. This was a camp for kids eleven to fifteen, taking place in the splendid Schloss Arenberg. The camp focused on *Bluebeard's Castle*—not

exactly a children's opera, to put it mildly. *Bluebeard* is one of the most ghastly and gruesome operas in the entire catalogue. But no matter—to be a camper at Camp Bartók, I'm given to understand, was to be a happy camper indeed. And that describes most people lucky enough to wander into the Salzburg Festival.

Jay Nordlinger is a Senior Editor at *National Review*.

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

This article originally appeared in The New Criterion, Volume 27 Number 2 , on page 49

https://newcriterion.com/issues/2008/10/salzburg-chronicle-3919