Franz Schreker was a very popular composer in the first part of the last century, especially from about 1915 to 1925. His operas were on a par with Strauss’s, commercially. But when the Nazis came to power, he was finished: They banned his music, and forced him out of the Berlin Conservatory, of which he had been director. Schreker, a Viennese, was Jewish—or at least he was in the Nazi concept. His father had been Jewish, though super-assimilated; his mother had been a minor Catholic aristocrat. The composer himself may be said to have been lucky to die early in the Reich: in 1934, two days short of his fifty-sixth birthday.

His music was honored at the Salzburg Festival this year, as other “forbidden” composers had been honored in preceding years. The festival is now done with that series: It was in part an act of penance. Among the other honorees were Alexander Zemlinsky and Erich Wolfgang Korngold. These composers were seldom heard for decades, although they have recently made a bit of a comeback, and not just in Salzburg. When talking about their fate, everyone says, “The Nazis, the Nazis.” Yes, the Nazis banned them—but Hitler and his gang fell from power in 1945. They were in power for only twelve years, a parenthesis, in historical terms. No Nazi has made a musical decision (as a Nazi!) for sixty years.

If Schreker, et al. were kept off the stage, it was the doing of a music establishment that turned hard against tonality, lyricism, beauty. When not ignored, this music was denounced as bourgeois dreck, the last gasp of a Romanticism that needed to die. Modernity, atonality, serialism—that was the name of the game. A scholar in Salzburg observed that Schreker and similar composers had to face a “second dictatorship.” This is a severe phrase, and exactly right. This same scholar also pointed out that the late Romantics were often denounced in the very terms the Nazis had used. You did not have to wear a swastika to think Korngold, for example, “degenerate.”

Franz Schreker’s music was sprinkled throughout the 2005 Salzburg Festival, giving us a healthy dose. The baritone Thomas Hampson organized two song recitals, both dedicated to “forbidden” composers. One was a solo recital, and the other was a group effort, involving three other singers.
In addition to Schreker, Hampson presented Erich Zeisl, Hanns Eisler, Ernst Krenek, Pavel Haas, and other relatively obscure composers. He also presented some canonical ones, such as Mendelssohn and Mahler.

The big Schreker work at the festival was an opera, *Die Gezeichneten*, or *The Branded Ones*. Composed in 1915, this is classic Schreker, and it would also put you in mind of Strauss—and Korngold, and Zemlinsky. Of course, all of these men owe a lot to Wagner (no matter what he would have thought of them); so great is this debt, we are apt to overlook it. The libretto—penned by Schreker himself—is a shocking one: The central character is a Genoese nobleman, Alviano, who is also a hunchback. He hates what he regards as his ugliness, and he builds a shrine to beauty on a nearby island. But his fellow noblemen are using a secret grotto there for orgies, and abduct the daughters of Genoa for this purpose. They are also murdering some of them. In due course, Alviano falls in love with Carlotta, an artist and (as it happens) the mayor’s daughter. Miraculously, she loves him back—for a moment. But then she submits to the handsome Tamare, chief of the criminal noblemen. Alviano discovers them, and stabs Tamare to death. Carlotta dies crying for her lover (not the hunchback). Alviano goes mad with grief.

It is a horrible opera—horrible in the first sense—and the conductor Kent Nagano led a moving performance. But the stage director, Nikolaus Lehnhoff, was bent on making the opera his own. I could provide many depressing details, but know simply that Alviano was, not a hunchback, but a crossdresser. And the daughters of Genoa? They were not young women: They were little girls, naked, shivering, bloody. As if *Die Gezeichneten* weren’t lurid enough. One point to make is, none of us had ever seen this opera before. So why not let us see it straight—faithful—just once? Monkey around with The Magic Flute and Carmen if you must. Everyone has seen those shows a hundred times. But Schreker never had a proper chance.

Speaking of Mozart, three of his operas were staged this year, including *The Magic Flute*. Next year, all twenty-two of Mozart’s operas will be staged. Why? Because it’s 2006, the two-hundred-fiftieth anniversary of Mozart’s birth, and you know anniversaritis. The good news about 2005’s *Magic Flute* is that it boasted some of the best Mozart singing imaginable: by the tenor Michael Schade and the bass René Pape, which you could have expected. These are two of the finest Mozart singers in the world, and two of the finest singers, period. But also impressive was the soprano in the role of Pamina, Genia Kühmeier, a local girl, a true Salzburgerin. She delivered a sterling “Ach, ich fühl’s,” one of the most difficult arias in opera.

And the stage direction? The temptation is to sigh. At best, Graham Vick’s conception was sweetly goofy, and at worst, it was detractively obnoxious. It was hard for the singing to compete with—to overcome—the stage direction. In a public interview, Thomas Hampson said something interesting: He called himself a “dinosaur,” for believing that “opera is music in a theatrical context,” not “theater in a musical context.” Indeed, let us put the horse before the cart.

Another of the Mozart operas staged was *Mitridate*, the composer’s first *opera seria*, written when
he was fourteen. (A hallmark of *opera seria* is recitative and aria, recitative and aria, on into the night. And the juvenile Mozart can hold your attention.) As with *The Magic Flute*, the singing was first-rate, including that of Miah Persson, a Swedish soprano who is becoming ever more a star, and Bejun Mehta, the American countertenor. Most satisfying of all was the tenor Richard Croft, whom I have called the best-kept secret in opera. He has a public, but he deserves a wider fame—at least as wide as that of his brother, the baritone Dwayne Croft. No tenor is smoother or more talented, including Michael Schade (whom Croft resembles). But the stage direction of *Mitridate* (by Günter Krämer)? Completely bonkers, and hardly in sympathy with the piece it should have served.

Doing orchestral duty were Les Musiciens du Louvre-Grenoble, conducted by their founder, Marc Minkowski. And this brings me to a point made by an acquaintance of mine in Salzburg: When it comes to these early, or earlyish operas, a strange dichotomy is at work. You could even call it a hypocrisy: In the pit, there must be absolute originalism—nothing smacking of the modern. But on the stage, the more outlandish—the more novel and screwy—the better. So, in the pit, you have a guy struggling through “Lungi da te” on the natural horn (as we did in Salzburg); and on the stage you could have a guy dressed like Tinkerbell performing a sex act. Shouldn’t our opera-makers be forced to decide? Are you all for fidelity or not?

By far the biggest hit in Salzburg this summer was the production of *La Traviata*, with the sensational Russian soprano Anna Netrebko in the title role. She was riveting, mesmerizing, heartbreaking—one of the best Violettas in memory. And the stage direction of Willy Decker was extraordinary. I have a number of complaints—natch—but, in the end, this production was convincing, even triumphant. Just one detail: Onstage throughout the opera was a large clock, representing the tyranny of time. Violetta struggled against it. Accompanying this clock was an old man, presumed to be Death, or Father Time. Only in the last act did we learn who he really was: Dr. Grenvil. That was perfect—for it is he who delivers the mortal verdict.

Spend a moment, now, with Gluck’s opera *Alceste*, a glory of what I would like to call the late Baroque. It was composed in 1776—a good year, all around. Traditionally, we know just one aria from *Alceste*, “Divinités du Styx,” of which Maria Callas made a famous recording. (Virtually all of her recordings are famous.) But the entire opera is a winner. In addition to Gluck’s smart and inspired score, the opera has a wonderful story, about the king, Admète (Admetus), and the sacrifice his wife, Alceste (Alcestis), is prepared to make for him.
You will hear no complaints about Salzburg’s production of Alceste, because this was a concert performance. It was not an ordinary concert performance, however, in that none of the singers used a score. For some reason, there is a rule that singers use scores in concert performances. Why this should be so is a mystery. If a pianist can memorize a Beethoven sonata—and if a singer can memorize a role for a staged production—surely a singer can learn the music for a concert performance. The singers in Salzburg’s Alceste did not exactly act, but neither did they merely stand and read. They struck an intelligent balance.

Outstanding in this cast was the soprano singing Alceste, an Italian with the wonderful name of Anna Caterina Antonacci. I have called her a soprano, but she is one of those in-betweenerers (sort of like Callas, in fact): She can go either way, soprano or mezzo. She does not have an especially big voice, but she has a voice that carries itself big, which is different, and useful. One could pick at La Antonacci’s performance: Her French was not exactly Pierre Bernac’s, and her singing was often effortful, and she was occasionally off pitch—she missed a big B flat in “Divinités du Styx” by a mile (low). But she is the kind of singer who seizes you, and whom you root for. Her singing was packed with emotion, though it did not offend Gluckian taste, and she involved you in every note and thought. She sang as though it mattered—and that is not encountered every day. I guess what I could say, more succinctly, is that there was an honesty about her singing. A rare and priceless quality in music.

Conducting Alceste was a fixture in Salzburg, Ivor Bolton, an Englishman who heads the Mozarteum Orchestra, a local band. This was, indeed, the band for Alceste, and it was tight and cohesive. So was the Salzburg Bach Choir, which served as Gluck’s chorus (a Greek chorus, in fact!). Patrons around town were buzzing about this “new” opera on the block, Alceste. May it stick around for a while.

The Salzburg Festival often seems to belong to the singer: in opera, and in recital. But other musicians have their say, and this season there were seven big piano recitals: Alfred Brendel is a regular; Arcadi Volodos played Beethoven, Scriabin, and Liszt; Lang Lang did his act (some of which is admirable); András Schiff promoted Czech music (Janacek and Smetana), as he has been doing lately; and so on. There was just one violin recital, by Midori, the one-named Japanese-born American, and she did some exquisite playing, along with some overly pretty, bloodless playing. Probably her best work was done in the slow movement of Beethoven’s Sonata in A major, Op. 30, No. 1—which is not to be confused with the “Kreutzer” Sonata, also in A major, but Op. 47. Is it necessary to say that even the lesser-known pieces of Beethoven are great?

Of vocal recitals, there was the usual banquet, and I will cite a few: Michael Schade sang Die schöne Müllerin, which he does consummately. The baritone Matthias Goerne gave a program of Mahler, Berg, and Wagner. No one owns a more beautiful voice than he, and he can deploy that voice compellingly. But he is prone to dullness, as he sadly demonstrated. Hampson sang his two recitals, and in the first—the only one I was able to hear—he was absolutely at the top of his game:
commanding and expressive. One could quibble, and I did, but there was no denying the overall excellence. And the most unusual recital came from the mezzo-soprano Cecilia Bartoli—unusual for Salzburg. She did a lightish program, of Italian songs (not necessarily by Italian composers). Accompanying her was András Schiff, a frequent partner. As for Bartoli’s performance, I can sum it up quickly: The singer was exactly who she is. If you love her, you loved this evening; if you are not so nuts about her, you were not so nuts about this evening. She was perfectly herself.

King of orchestras at Salzburg is the Vienna Philharmonic, whose summer home the festival is. One of its concert programs was under Riccardo Muti, late of La Scala, and a presence in Salzburg for many years. Muti also conducted the Philharmonic in *The Magic Flute* (unevenly).

His concert program had a theme, namely destiny, or “fateful pronouncements.” It started with a curious piece, *Coro di morti* (*Chorus of the Dead*), by Goffredo Petrassi. This was once a big name, but is less big now. Petrassi was an Italian who lived an extremely long life—1904 to 2003—and who was boss at the Santa Cecilia Academy in Rome. He wrote *Coro di morti* in 1941. Muti must feel a particular affection for the piece, because he brought it to New York last season, when he guest-conducted the Philharmonic (New York’s, I should say). The performance in Salzburg was better than the one in New York, and that had been good. The *Coro di morti* is called a “dramatic madrigal,” and it uses an unusual combination of forces: brass, percussion, double-basses, men’s chorus … and three pianos. Various people have remarked the Stravinskyan influence, and that is correct.

Muti’s account was spare, spooky, well-balanced. Especially good were the Viennese brass players, who were smooth and warm. Entrances, from everyone, were beautifully correct—and the Vienna State Opera Chorus knew what it was doing. This is a worthy piece, and regardless of whether Muti feels some national pride in it, it deserves to be heard.

I wish to offer a side note about Petrassi: When the American composer Lee Hoiby—now eighty—was young, he won a Fulbright scholarship to study at Santa Cecilia. But when he got there, the academy would not accept him: Hoiby was writing tonal, lyrical music (as he always would), and the academy said he would have to adopt a new tongue, abandoning this passé stuff. As Hoiby puts it: “I wanted to grow heirloom roses, but you were allowed nothing but cactuses.” And the principal figure keeping him out? Petrassi. (*Coro di morti*, incidentally, is not an especially modernist work.) History will know who lasts longest, who laughs last, so to speak.

Next on Muti’s program was a Brahms piece that used to be performed far more often than it is today: the *Schicksalslied*, or *Song of Destiny*, a superb chorus. Of course, choral music in general is heard less often than it once was, and there is much great literature lying fallow. And Muti’s performance? I have never been his biggest fan, but I would be hard pressed to imagine a better performance. It was beautifully paced, beautifully felt, beautifully breathed—overwhelming, really. Much of the credit goes to the Vienna chorus, which is one of the best in the world. Its warmth is almost otherworldly. And it must matter that this group sings a beautiful German. I cite
merely one phrase: “Glänzende Götterlüfte,” “blazing, divine breezes.” The phrase sounded like its meaning.

In the second half of the program, Maestro Muti did something rather daring: He programmed Beethoven’s Fifth. Odd how seldom you hear this work in concert halls—I mean, given that it is the most famous symphony extant. Muti did not treat the Fifth as well as he had the Schicksalslied, to put it mildly. Let me begin with an old complaint about the Vienna Philharmonic: That sound is so lush—so rich, so beautiful, so warm—that is sometimes lacks musical punch. In the first movement of the Beethoven, you felt that you were being buffeted by velvet pillows. I would have liked more muscle, more bite—even a little savagery. And yet this orchestra is a remarkable machine: It reminds you of what an orchestra can do, and makes you less tolerant of mediocrity. Entrances can be clean; pizzicato can be together; horns can be unflubbing. And that’s just a short list.

One of Muti’s problems in the first movement was that he rushed through key passages, unwisely. This had been a big problem in The Magic Flute, too. And Beethoven’s second movement—Andante con moto—was super-fast. Muti takes that “con moto” seriously, which is fine; but the playing was not especially musical. And in the third movement, the orchestra actually broke down, at breakneck tempos. Worse, that movement was without its incredible suspense. As for the finale, it was sort of on autopilot: merely played, as though by computer. Rests were unfelt, and unimportant. This music embodies soul, nobility, heart—it is one of the best examples we have of vaulting humanity. The notes were there, to be sure—but not so much the music, and this goes a long way toward explaining why I have always been uneasy about Riccardo Muti.

But I should never forget that Schicksalslied.

I wish to close by mentioning a concert featuring Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau. Yes, you read that right. The great baritone turned eighty this year, and the festival observed that milestone with a special concert—a Sonderkonzert—in the Felsenreitschule. The event took place fifty-four years to the day after Fischer-Dieskau’s Salzburg debut, which occurred on August 19, 1951. Furtwängler had asked him to sing The Songs of a Wayfarer. Fischer-Dieskau officially retired from singing in 1992, but he has extended his career with a variety of speaking roles: and this summer he assumed the role of speaker in Schumann’s Manfred, which the composer labeled “a dramatic poem with music.” Fischer-Dieskau performed brilliantly, with all his intelligence and talent. And he looks exactly like himself: erect, distinguished, handsome, confidence-exuding, all that hair. I would wager he could still sing a little—more than a little. When Fischer-Dieskau emerged from the wings, the critic next to me broke out into a kind of happy laughter. He said, “I didn’t think I’d ever see him come onstage again.” I’m sure that many in the audience felt the same way. Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau has gotten more out of a career—done more with it—than practically anyone in music. How marvelous that he is not yet through with it.
Jay Nordlinger is a Senior Editor at National Review.

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

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