Music October 2006

Salzburg chronicle

by Jay Nordlinger

The offerings at this year’s Salzburg festival.

As you must know, this is a “Mozart year,” meaning that it is 2006, making it the two-hundred-fiftieth anniversary of Mozart’s birth. As you also know, every year is a Mozart year, for he is central to music. But, given the music world’s penchant for anniversaries and overkill, this year had to be extravagant—and so it has been. Since January 27, the Birthday itself, we have had nonstop Mozart. And what of Mozart festivals, in particular? Before this summer, I said that they would be more superfluous than ever, seeing as the entire world was one big Mozart festival. But, somehow, the festivals took on extra luster. The Mostly Mozart Festival at New York’s Lincoln Center was proud, reverential, celebratory, touching—all of those. And so was the Salzburg Festival.

Now, the Salzburg Festival isn’t properly a Mozart festival, or a Mozart festival at all. Rather, it is a festival extremely respectful of Mozart. Salzburg is, after all, the composer’s hometown, and one of the founders of the festival—Richard Strauss—said that this chap ought to be honored in his hometown. (Strauss occupies a special place at the festival as well.) In July and August of ’06, however, the Salzburg Festival was very much a Mozart festival. Virtually every concert included at least some Mozart, and usually a lot of Mozart. And the opera stages were entirely given over to him: No one else’s opera was performed; all twenty-two Mozart operas—or near-operas, or stage works—were presented. So keen is Salzburg to emphasize its link to Mozart that it renamed its Kleines Festspielhaus (Little Festival Hall) the Haus für Mozart. And so it shall remain, perhaps for all time.

Opera is always a big deal at the festival, grabbing the lion’s share of attention. So I thought—almost in the interest of redress—that we would start with other things, specifically pianists and orchestras. We will take up the operas soon enough.

For the past several decades, two pianists have been prominent at the festival: Maurizio Pollini and Alfred Brendel. Why festival administrators chose these pianists, of all the pianists in the world, I can’t say; but chosen them they have. And both of these senior gentlemen gave recitals...
this year. But so did others, including Stephen Hough, which was a wise choice, because he is extraordinary and receives less publicity than many of his (less deserving) colleagues.

Pollini gave a recital that featured Mozart on the first half and twentieth-century composers—Webern and Boulez—on the second half. His Mozart pieces were the Fantasy in C minor, K. 475, and the Sonata in C minor, K. 457 (those pieces go together); and the Adagio in B minor, K. 540, and the Sonata in D, K. 576. As he played, Pollini showed what is best about him, and what is worst. When he is playing well, he is smart, clear, somewhat aristocratic. And when he is playing badly, or obdurately, he is cold, mechanical, soulless. I have said that he can resemble an accountant going over his figures, more than a musician dealing with notes.

Really superb in Pollini’s recital was that Adagio in B minor. It is a very brief piece, and not very often played, but encapsulates much of Mozart’s genius. And Pollini allowed you to see through “interpretation”—there was none, really—to the piece itself. I had the sense of beholding Mozart, and whatever wisdom informed him, undefiled. But that Sonata in D? That piece requires—begs for—some sparkle, a bit of merriment, maybe a smile. And Pollini was downright grim, plus muddy in his execution, and that is a lousy combination.

The Webern he played was a work of concentrated intelligence and beauty: the Variations, Op. 27. And Pollini is quite good at concentrated intelligence and beauty. He ended his program with Pierre Boulez’s massive Second Piano Sonata, written in 1948, when the composer was in his early twenties. In an article excerpted in Salzburg’s program booklet, Paul Griffiths wrote that Boulez wanted to “destroy” and “dissolve” traditional forms. (Those were the words of the composer himself: “destroy” and “dissolve.”) Griffiths also wrote that Boulez was “saying an angry ‘no’”—and that is certainly true. But I believe that history, and music, will say an angry “no” to Boulez.

You are perhaps familiar with the King James phrase “an hard saying.” Well, this is an hard saying: After this beloved composer-conductor is gone—and after his many friends and supporters among performers are gone—scarcely a note of his music will be heard. At least that is my suspicion. And I suspect the same is true of many, many other contemporary composers, in what we might call the Boulez school. I suspect that future generations will look back at our era—how many times has James Levine programmed Elliott Carter? a million?—and say, “What in the world were they thinking? Why were they under this bizarre spell, or why did they think they had to pay this obligation?” Then again, I may be nuts.

At any rate, Boulez has a magnificent champion in Pollini, for he played the Second Piano Sonata with all the manfulness, technique, and commitment it requires. Then, for an encore, he sat down to a Debussy prelude—*The Sunken Cathedral*—which was shrewdly colored and exquisite.

Alfred Brendel played a recital of Haydn and Schubert on the first half; then Mozart and Haydn on the second. I thought of a favorite quip, from Artur Schnabel: “My programs are boring both before and after intermission.” Schnabel did not give his audiences lollipops.
As for Brendel, he played exactly this recital in Carnegie Hall last February, and he was in fine form on both occasions. I myself have never been sold on Brendel, as the heir to Schnabel. I think he gets credit just for looking the part: prominent spectacles, unruly hair, professorial demeanor—and, then, of course, there are those serious programs. But he is no doubt capable of first-rate playing.

When he played his Haydn, he revealed his tendency to be herky-jerky. He can play rather Germanically, if I may, disregarding smoothness of line. And please bear in mind that Germanicness is not necessarily a matter of nationality: Wilhelm Backhaus was a German pianist but not a Germanic one. In any case, we could admire much in Brendel’s Haydn. When you listen to him, you realize that a lot of learning, thinking, and civilization goes into his playing. I can’t say that Brendel’s Haydn was real fun (and that is an ingredient of Haydn: fun). But it was distinguished and enjoyable nonetheless.

A brief word about the Schubert sonata he played, which was the one in G major, D. 894. This is a great work—a work both monumental and beautiful—and I was reminded of a statement by another pianist: Artur Rubinstein said that the Schubert sonatas are “full of music,” a slightly mysterious phrase, but comprehensible all the same. Rubinstein himself was reluctant to play them in public, thinking that audiences wouldn’t accept them, chiefly because of their length. But he loved to play them in private. Schubert sonatas are relatively common on programs now, although one of them is dominant: the Sonata in B flat, D. 960. Indeed, that piece is one of the most ubiquitous of all piano pieces. But the G-major sonata deserves its place, and Brendel did it justice. He grasped the scope of the work, pacing it wisely. And he positively reveled in the last movement—Allegretto—particularly in its unexpected key changes.

Now to a pianist fifty years Brendel’s junior. Readers may recall that, in the April issue of this journal, I spoke of walking out on Lang Lang. He was playing Rachmaninoff’s D-minor concerto, and he was so brutal with it—so willful in it, so disrespectful of it—I could not sit still. I up and left, after the first movement. (I wanted to leave after the first page or two, but that would have been far too awkward.) Why do I remind you of this? Not to kick Lang Lang once more, but to indicate how astonishing it was to hear him play a Mozart concerto—No. 17 in G, K. 453—in Salzburg. I have long held that Lang Lang is best in Haydn, Mozart, and other Classical composers, probably because the music restrains him more. (Would that he were as faithful to Rachmaninoff.) And this performance—with the Vienna Philharmonic, Pierre Boulez conducting—confirmed that.

He was enchanting, let me tell you, and Mozart himself might have played this concerto not dissimilarly. Lang Lang took liberties, to be sure, but they were not stupid liberties: They were musical ones. He got a little cute with the middle movement, when a straighter approach would have been more effective, but that was okay. On balance, he was alert, sensitive, and, as I said, enchanting. In the bargain, he displayed one of the most beautiful tones you will ever hear from a piano. And in the closing Allegretto—speaking of closing Allegrettos (and in G major!)—he gave
the impression of riding a horse, delighting in whatever route the horse (Mozart’s music) wanted to take. I find myself dumbfounded to be reporting to you that this was some of the best Mozart playing I have heard. When the concerto was over, the men of the Vienna Philharmonic applauded robustly. That itself said a lot.

Up above, I said I would discuss orchestras, but let’s leave the Vienna Philharmonic aside: It receives enough ink. Let’s, instead, concentrate on one, more modest band: the Deutsche Kammerphilharmonie Bremen, which is to say, the German Chamber Philharmonic of Bremen. This may be a chamber orchestra, but it can pack a mighty punch. Two summers ago, it was a star at the Mostly Mozart Festival, under its music director, Paavo Järvi. In an all-Beethoven program—Mostly Mozart or not—they were bracing, taut, and, in the perfectly apt word of one critic (not me), hot. They were good in Salzburg, too.

They played a program that began with Mozart’s Serenade in D, K. 250, known as the “Haffner” Serenade. The Haffners were big in Salzburg in Mozart’s time, and the composer knew the family well. His Symphony No. 35, you will recall, is also known as the “Haffner.” And—here is a real triviality—I stay on Sigmund Haffner Street, when in Salzburg. Mozart wrote the serenade for a wedding in that family, and it is an hour-long, eight-movement affair. I myself am not convinced that these serenades—even the greatest—should be played in a concert hall, complete. They seem to me better suited to a picnic, or some other relaxed, leisurely occasion. By this I mean no offense: for these serenades are Mozart, and they contain much excellent music.

At the beginning of this concert, a handful of musicians were onstage, in their seats. The band seemed pretty sparse, even for a chamber orchestra. But when this handful launched the march that precedes the serenade, the rest of the musicians filed out, casually. Each joined the music as soon as he sat down, and before long we had a full complement. That was a nice gimmick, or idea (to put it more politely). Throughout the Serenade, Järvi had his group sparkling and tight. They seemed to have been prepared to the nth degree, and they probably were. The group played with the kind of transparency and crispness associated with “period” bands; but they were never clipped, mechanical, or brusque. And the minuets were especially good: rustic and elegant at the same time.

A footnote, if I may: In last month’s issue, I had an article—“Who’s Good?”—that surveyed today’s music scene. Of the conductors I mentioned, three are sons of conductors: Järvi, whose father is Neeme; Mariss Jansons, whose father was Arvid; and Philippe Jordan, whose father is Armin. Music, like so many others, is a family business.

Finally, those operas, the centerpiece of Salzburg ’06. According to festival officials, the twenty-two stage works had never been presented in a single sitting, so to speak. And I opposed this idea, in the years leading up to the Big One: thinking it an egregious example of the completeness craze that has blighted music. But, happily, I was wrong: This was a splendid idea, edifying and even exciting, allowing us to appreciate Mozart all the more. Salzburg was obviously proud of what it was doing, and rightly so: They had banners about town that said “Mozart 22”—not
“Mozart at 250” (or some such thing), but “Mozart 22.” The first of those twenty-two is *Apollo et Hyacinthus*, composed when Mozart was eleven; the last is *La clemenza di Tito*, composed in Mozart’s final year, his thirty-fifth. (*The Magic Flute* was finished last, but begun before *Tito*.) I might add that, in the final days of the festival, *Apollo et Hyacinthus* was performed in the place of its premiere: the Great Hall of Salzburg University, recently restored by Donald and Jeanne Kahn, Salzburg’s principal benefactors.

The festival engaged in many innovations: For instance, Mozart’s little singspiel *Bastien und Bastienne*, written when he was twelve, was combined with *The Impresario*, another singspiel, written when he was thirty. (The gimmick was that the title character of *The Impresario* was putting on *Bastien und Bastienne.*) This show was staged at Salzburg’s famed Marionette Theater, with an assortment of marionettes and real, live, human singers. A nifty idea, and one of the hits of the festival. Frankly, it has long been quipped that the best Mozart productions are to be found at the Marionette Theater, so screwy and violative have the productions in the city’s major venues become.

And what about those productions this summer? Some were old, some were new; some were atrocious, some were bright. Something like *The Abduction from the Seraglio* can be dismissed—it is barely Mozart’s opera. Salzburg, in the person of stage director Stefan Herheim, has fashioned its own perversion. And I will tell you a story about the festival’s *Don Giovanni*, directed by Martin Kušej, who is also head of theater in Salzburg. Actually, this is Thomas Hampson’s story, and he related it in a public interview this summer. (Hampson, as you know, is the great American baritone, and he stars in *Don Giovanni.*) When the production was new, he invited his friend and teacher, Elisabeth Schwarzkopf, to see it. (Schwarzkopf, incidentally, died a couple of months ago.) She left at intermission. Later, she told him, “How can you lend your talent to such a thing? How can you participate?” Obviously, Hampson disagrees, and he has sound reasons: He is a very thoughtful man, in addition to a great singer. But, I must say, I’m with Schwarzkopf on this one.

The *Cosi fan tutte*? Directed by the husband-and-wife team of Karl-Ernst and Ursel Hermann, it is by turns charmingly whimsical and daft. But the main fact about it is that the girls—Fiordiligi and Dorabella—are in on the ruse of the guys. They go through the motions anyway. And the story of *Cosi* is strained enough, in my view, without this imposition (which is not new, alas). If, in *La Traviata*, you have Violetta know exactly why Alfredo is leaving her, do you have an opera? If, in *Madame Butterfly*, you have Cio-Cio-San know that this no-good lieutenant has ditched her for a woman named Kate, do you have an opera? I mean, why bother?

Similar impositions mar Claus Guth’s *Marriage of Figaro*, a new production. Throughout the opera, Susanna is in clinches with the Count. Likewise, the Countess gets it on with Cherubino, as does Susanna. (Susanna is a very active little maid in the Guth *Figaro.*) Salzburg has taught me something I never knew: that you can completely alter the story of an opera without changing a word of the libretto—simply by having the characters act in unprescribed and novel ways. If stage directors really want to create new operas, they should write their own. Their obsession with
painting mustaches on Mona Lisas is both childish and reprehensible.

But there was at least one production in Salzburg that was really enchanting: that of The Magic Flute, an excellent opera to be enchanting with. This production replaced last year’s, which was directed by Graham Vick: and it was an avant-garde puzzlement. So, thanks to the Kahns, the festival imported Pierre Audi’s production from Amsterdam, and it is what a Flute should be. (Have I mentioned the word “enchanting”? This is not to say that it’s “traditional,” in some negative sense, or “safe” or unimaginative. On the contrary, it is fabulously imaginative. But it stays true to Mozart and his librettist, Herr Schikaneder. Imagine that. Radical.

But enough about productions. Would you like to hear about singers? Me too. I will name a few of the best, from sopranos on down. Portraying Susanna was Anna Netrebko, the rock star of Salzburg, and, indeed, the rock star of the opera world. Her image was everywhere, and a lovely image it is. In Figaro, she was often sharp (of pitch), and I have always found her a bit cold, vocally, for Mozart. But, as a package, she was irresistible. If I may use a cliché, you couldn’t take your eyes off her. Christine Schäfer was Cherubino, a role ordinarily sung by a mezzo—and Schäfer was her usual self: musical, intelligent, adept. Dorothea Röschmann wowed ’em as Vitellia in La clemenza di Tito. She does that almost every time she opens her mouth.

And returning as Despina in Così fan tutte was Helen Donath, the American soprano—a Texan—who made her Salzburg debut in 1967. You had to allow no concessions for age. (Would it be unpardonably rude of me to mention that she is sixty-six?) The voice was there, the technique was there, and the acting was superb. Donath relished Despina, making you relish her, too.

An outstanding mezzo was Vesselina Kasarova, Sesto in Tito. If Röschmann wowed ’em, Kasarova absolutely killed ’em. Rather than give my opinion, I will give the audience’s: When Kasarova came out for her bow, they made one of the loudest noises I have ever heard in an opera house. I agreed. How about a tenor? Michael Schade was Tito, and every inch that character. How about a bass? René Pape, as usual, was Sarastro (The Magic Flute), and, though he is still youngish (early forties), he long ago established himself as one of the all-time greats: in this role and not a few others.

And a conductor? Many presided in the pit, but none outshine Nikolaus Harnoncourt, the Austrian maestro who’s nearing eighty. Never have I heard him conduct so powerfully and convincingly. In both Figaro and Tito, he was all authority, and even if you disagreed with some of his choices—as in tempos—you knew that he knew what he was doing, and had a case. And his love and understanding of Mozart are communicable. Get ready, friends: The three-hundredth anniversary is practically around the corner.
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This article originally appeared in The New Criterion, Volume 25 Number 2, on page 57
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