

08+09/2015

**OPER UND BALLETT
IN WIEN UND ALLER WELT**

Salzburg:
Es leben die Reprisen!

Bayreuth:
„Tristan“-Erfolg

München:
Star-Parade

Bad Wildbad/Pesaro:
Rossini-Hommage

Im Gespräch:
Die Intendantinnen
Elisabeth Sobotka/Bregenz
Nora Schmid/Graz

**Stefan Mickisch –
universeller Quellenforscher**



**Festspiel-
sommer**

and Alumni from the **Britten-Pears Young Artist Programme** with Wolf, Schubert and Britten. **Christine Rice** gave a searing performance of Britten's cantata 'Phaedra'.

Two big orchestral concerts provided rich treats: the **BBC Symphony** under **Martyn Brabbins** programmed **Sibelius' Oceanides** and **Frank Bridge's The Sea**, and as the final event (tying in with Gamelan workshops, study days and Mead dance events) **Oliver Knussen** and the **Britten-Pears Orchestra** gave exciting and rare performances of **Colin McPhee's Tabub-Tabuban** and a selection of an hour of music from **Britten's** only ballet *The Prince of the Pagodas*. Fortunately Knussen had also programmed **Gunther Schuller's Paul Klee Studies**. Schuller died the week before and Knussen paid moving tribute to him, one of his teachers and warmly recommended by Britten to the fledgling composer.

Of the visual Arts, silent films with improvised accompaniments by Gabriela Montero were the most unusual, and the main exhibition was of work by John Craske, a unique artist who, with connections to fishing and becoming a chronic invalid, took up painting and embroidery of the sea and ships. Pears formed a considerable collection and it was good to see them again properly displayed. *Stephen Mead*

Taipei: "FIDELIO"

What if the sharpshooter who killed John F. Kennedy had missed? What if the plot to assassinate Hitler had succeeded? What if the American aircraft carriers had all been at Pearl Harbor when the Japanese attacked? What if...? It's fun to speculate how history might have taken a drastically different course if events like these had occurred. In his much-vaunted *Fidelio*, director **Andreas Homoki** has brought "What if?" to opera. It opens with a flash-forward to the dungeon scene at the moment when Pizarro is about to shoot Florestan. A mad scramble for the pistol involv-

ditionalists since the production was first seen in Zürich in December 2013. In addition to the novel opening, Homoki reverses the order of the first two numbers (this creates only slight structural damage), displaces Rocco's "Gold" aria to after the "Abscheulicher" aria (where it jars violently with what has just transpired), omits the intermission between acts, and dispenses with the melodrama and dialogues. Excerpts from the dialogues and stage directions are projected on the back wall; but at two hours in length, Beethoven's disjointed succession of dramatic events, turned by Homoki into non-stop music, really needs transitions of some sort to link them. Then there are the many unanswered questions: Why does Leonora alone run around barefoot? Why is Florestan blindfolded until just moments before the end? Marzelline knows the title character's true identity, as Homoki has her dress Fidelio as a man in the opera's opening scene, but then how can Marzelline credibly proceed to make amorous advances to her/him?

Homoki's monochromatic color scheme of black/white/grey continues right to the end of the opera – not a ray of color or a single burst of light to signify a happy ending. But then, his is *not* a happy ending. The show ends (there is no curtain) with an apparently dead Leonora. Was everything between the beginning and the end just a wish? Or a dream? (The stark shadows, lack of color, and confining box set from which there is seemingly no escape would support the dream interpretation.) Questions multiply to the extent that a coherent line of thought becomes difficult. Homoki has stated that "in his music, Beethoven told a different story than did his librettists." Perhaps, but Homoki has expanded this claim to the point where there is a serious disconnect between what we see and what we hear. In any case, though, he leaves us with much to unravel, and much to think about.

This all worked beautifully in Taipei, where audiences routinely see a wide variety of theatrical productions: Broadway musicals, blockbuster sensations, Chinese opera, variety shows, rock stars, but very few western operas, so there was little basis for comparison when Homoki's *Fidelio* came to town for three performances at the National Theater (22, 24, 26 July). I was told that Homoki's bare stage – just a grey box with not a single prop in sight – recalled for the Taiwanese the analogous relative absence of sets and props for Chinese opera. Furthermore, audiences here for western classical music, including opera, include many hip, young, curious, open-minded people for whom something like Homoki's *Fidelio* is just the ticket for a stimulating evening at the theater. Reflecting the seriously casual Taipei audiences, their dress code is basically "come as you are." Three sold-out performances followed by enthusiastic applause attested to the success of the production, which had been imported by Taiwan's flagship orchestra, the **National Symphony Orchestra** (the Taiwan Philharmonic when it travels abroad) as its annual operatic offering.

Ann Petersen sounded miscast in the title role. Though there was much expressive nuance in her interpretation, she lacked the heft the role demands, and too often resorted to yelling. Likewise, **Miklós Sebastyén's** voice – beautiful, almost opulent, but without a trace of menace or evil – did not make for a convincing Pizarro.

Kor-Jan Dusseljee (Florestan) has a touch of steel in his voice, not unlike what we used to hear in Jon Vickers, and there were moments when one imagined that Dusseljee might well have had Vickers in mind as a role model. The remaining roles were all taken by Taiwanese, mostly with success. Best of them was **Grace Lin**, totally credible as a pert, vivacious young woman head over heels in love with her father's new assistant. Every syllable she sang had musical import. **Wen-Hao Tsai** (Rocco) had perhaps the

best diction of any member of the cast. The voice is not big, but it is well-focused, and carries well. **Yi-Te Hung** was an acceptable Jaquino, but **Wu Bai-Yu-Hsi** left little impression as Don Fernando. The **Taipei Philharmonic Chorus**, 75 strong, was superbly trained by **Yu-Chung John Ku**. Their first "Heil" of the final scene was electrifying.

With his Viennese training and extensive experience in German opera houses, the NSO's music director, **Shao-Chia Lü**, felt totally natural in the pacing and momentum. While underplaying some of the score's dramatic urgency, Lü emphasized lyricism and intimacy more so than do many other conductors. There were more flubs in the brass and more problems with intonation in the woodwinds than one normally hears from the NSO, but there were also moments of magic: the sublime opening of "Mir ist so wunderbar", which seemed to come from another world; the lovingly shaped oboe solos from I-Ching Wang, and the splendid horn playing in the "Abscheulicher" aria, in which the entire section displayed the same fierce determination being enacted on stage by Leonora.

The NSO puts its best foot forward for opera. A handsomely produced 100-page program book included the full libretto in German and Mandarin (in Homoki's rearrangement); production photos; and essays, artist bios, and a synopsis all in English and Mandarin. Translation of the libretto into Mandarin and English appeared on side screens, with up to four colors of print as needed. *Robert Markow*

Singapore: MAHLER'S 8TH SYMPHONY

What do you give your country on the occasion of its 50th anniversary? In Singapore, the Orchestra of the Music Makers presented "A Gift to the Entire Nation": Mahler's Eighth Symphony (*Symphony of a Thousand*). Sold-out performances were given on July 10 and 11 in the Concert Hall of Singapore's iconic Esplanade, Theatres on the Bay one month before the official date (August 9) when Singapore turned 50 as an independent state. The great hymn of praise in Part I, and the joyful, visionary message and sense of achievement following struggle in Part II made the symphony a perfect choice as a reflection of Singapore's own spectacular growth into an Asian tiger.

As a measure of the determination, vitality, energy, and national pride that drive this island nation of five million, the **Orchestra of the Music Makers** (OMM) is itself a reflection of Singapore – an orchestra that has existed for a mere seven years, yet has already fashioned itself into a model of organizational and musical excellence. What OMM gave to Singapore through its Mahler Eighth project was an epic achievement that is certain to remain long in the memory of all who heard it.

OMM formed almost by spontaneous combustion – the result of a burning passion for playing music by highly talented high school graduates who were going on to study in other fields, but who also wanted to continue playing in an orchestra. OMM is a self-governing, all-volunteer orchestra consisting of a pool of about 140 musicians with an average age of 23. The slightly cumbersome yet poetic name in fact does come from poetry. Some readers may be familiar with Elgar's gorgeous but little-known oratorio *The Music Makers*, set to the eponymous poem by the 19th-century author Arthur O'Shaughnessy. Its opening lines, "We are the music makers, / And we are the dreamers of dreams", accurately reflect the soul and spirit of the ensemble. Obviously, its members are "music makers". But more importantly, they are also "the dreamers of dreams", dreams that actually come true: the dream to form an orchestra of their own, the dream to continue playing after high school, the dream to serve one's community and contribute to a progressive society. OMM's "Gift to the Entire Nation" in 2015 was not just artistic; it was philanthropic as well. Funds raised through the concerts were donated to local charities. Reaching out to the entire community and providing support for the needy have been among OMM's guiding principles from the start: in just seven years, the



Mahler-Poster in Singapore (© HSBC)

orchestra has raised over Sg \$7 million (4.7 million Euros) for various charitable causes – all the more reason why OMM should have been the orchestra to present Mahler's "Gift to the Entire Nation."

Toh Xue Qian, OMM's President, noted that "OMM strives to challenge every member to push the boundaries of what they can achieve – whether musically or otherwise. By providing opportunities for youths to observe, plan, or even take charge of projects, we hope to develop leaders who will lead Singapore to greater heights".

As further extensions of OMM's gift to the nation, a performance of Part I of the symphony (with reduced chorus) was given free of charge in one of Singapore's most glamorous shopping malls (Paragon) on Orchard Road, and a nifty, 28-page guide in cartoon format was prepared to introduce school children to the work in friendly tones and non-technical language. (Gretchen, for example, became "Faust's ex-girlfriend.") The orchestra numbered 135, with every instrument Mahler called for including mandolin, organ, celesta, two sets of timpani, eight horns, additional brass choirs perched high in the balconies... the works. OMM's performances were on the highest professional level. The orchestra's sound is rich, warm and cultured – never forced or harsh. No smudging of the low notes, no swallowing ends of phrases, no rushing the beat. Few, if any of these musicians had ever played the symphony before, yet they sounded as if it were all second nature to them. Aside from a few woodwind passages in Part II, intonation was spot-on. Ensemble within each section was nearly perfect. All eight horns in unison, blazing with power and brilliance, sounded like one. The result was breathtakingly majestic without overwhelming the senses. Right from the first choral outburst one knew this was going to be a performance made in heaven. The clarity, precision and power heard in that first *Veni* informed the entire symphony. There was splendor beyond words at the big moments (the return of the opening *Veni* near the end of Part I had me rising out of my seat) and other-



Esplanade Concert Hall in Taipei

ing also Leonora and Rocco results in the accidental shooting of Leonora, a second before the famous trumpet call announcing the arrival of the Minister. As every operaphile knows, it is the trumpet call that saves the day for Florestan. But what if it had come too late? That is the question Homoki presents to his audience, and that becomes the underlying approach to how events unfold.

It's an intriguing premise that has delighted modernists and dismayed tra-