

## SALZBURG FESTIVAL 2011



Le nozze di Figaro / Don Giovanni / Così fan tutte

### Mozart's Polarizing Effect Today

*For the first time, the da Ponte cycle in the version by Claus Guth and his designer Christian Schmidt can be seen in its entirety this summer at the Haus für Mozart. It is a work in progress, far removed from familiar concepts, which has led to multiple new insights over the course of six years. Here, three of the most well-known Mozart operas prove their relevance for our times.*

There were those passionately in favor and those in total opposition – this da Ponte cycle, developed by director Claus Guth between 2006 and 2009 for the newly constructed Mozart theater, left nobody indifferent. Ultimately, that is the best proof of quality for a stage work.

When the Mozart Year saw the first installment of the trilogy, *Figaro*, opinion was deeply divided. At the time, Nikolaus Harnoncourt was conducting, and not only did he have very decided opinions regarding tempi, but he also insisted on performing two arias in Act IV which are usually cut. The exquisite casting – unforgettable: Christine Schäfer as Cherubino, Anna Netrebko as Susanna – did not alleviate the problem. The accusations included a lack of any sense of comedy, the fact that this was no “topsy-turvy day” and no titillating romantic dallying including funny costumes and mistaken identities, but a miserable relationship drama in the style of Ingmar Bergman, that instead of a summery, lighthearted garden scene, one was confronted with an upside-down stairway, autumnal leaves and lots of black ravens. The open-minded faction among the critics, however, noted even then that this interpretation with its “nightmarish emotional labyrinth”, set in a “castle of lost souls”, tried to get to the bottom of this popular work as “relentlessly” as it was “clear-sighted”.

The two revivals under Daniel Harding in 2007 and 2009 brought a return to musical “normality”, and in the evolving context with the two other pieces, the staging grew slightly more lighthearted. Claus Guth interprets *Figaro* as “toying with the unlimited possibilities of Eros”, although the “game-maker” Cherubino must die in the end. A person whose erotic dealings bring constant upheaval into the world cannot be tolerated, in the long run.

What remains of Cherubino is the Eros Angel, a symbolic figure invented for the production and embodied by the dancer Uli Kirsch, which made another, transformed appearance in 2009 in *Così fan tutte*: as a partial personality of the cynical, completely disillusioned Don Alfonso, who tempts the young and inexperienced couples into playing a game nobody can win. In the context of the da Ponte cycle, to Claus Guth, *Così fan tutte* is the opposite of *Figaro*, “where toying with the possibilities becomes perverted. Here, determinism triumphs; the work demonstrates the predictability of feelings, and if one examines this development in the biographical context of Mozart’s life, that leaves a very bitter taste indeed.”

This summer will bring an almost entirely new cast, and Claus Guth is planning to emphasize the character of experimentation even more. Because the protagonists seem like cut-outs and can only appear as psychologically creditable if they are developed directly from the concrete personality of the performers, he wants to exclude almost entirely the social background of the two rich ladies Fiordiligi and Dorabella, which is hard to peg anyway.

## Breaking with Operatic Convention

Incidentally, the stage sets for *Così fan tutte* show how intricately the concepts for the three works are interwoven: here, we find again the flight of steps which was central to *Figaro* and the dark, dirty forest symbolizing uncontrollable libido. It was the forest which caused endless agitation in 2008, when the first *Don Giovanni* production was unveiled.

This was no elegant cloak-and-dagger piece, but the abject existential borderline situation of a man caught in his own obsession, whose life is passing by inexorably. Rarely were Eros and Thanatos so inescapably interlocked, and rarely were the consequences for all those persons who encounter this title hero, whose actions defy all norms, visible so drastically. The case of Donna Anna is the most obvious. “The motive of filial love is too weak to justify her music,” as Wolfgang Hildesheimer rightfully remarked. In Claus Guth’s production, therefore, she does not appear as a confused girl, but as an autonomous young woman making one last passionate attempt at breaking out of the mold, before submitting to an arranged marriage – predictably, she is sucked into the maelstrom of Don Giovanni’s hell-bound ride.

The very specific intensity which Mozart invokes in this opera’s sound-world, the restlessness that dominates it, finds a scenic parallel in the agony Don Giovanni experiences after he is wounded in the opening duel with the Commendatore. Thus, it is only consequent that in this case – reverting to the so-called “Viennese version” of the work – the moralizing final ensemble is omitted. It is a clear break with 18<sup>th</sup> century operatic convention which also reveals those aspects of the score that point towards the future: here, Mozart’s *dramma giocoso* takes off in the direction of Romantic opera.

## Revolution in the Orchestra Pit

The workshop mode in which this cycle was reassessed and developed further over a period of six years kept inspiring the leading team, among which the dramaturges Ronny Dietrich and Andri Hardmeier must be counted as well, over and over. “It was a great temptation for us to keep experimenting with the pieces from year to year,” says Claus Guth, who says he grew most fond of *Figaro* and its distinctively playful elements during this period.

This summer, the new da Ponte cycle can be viewed in its entirety for the first time, as a grand panorama of life concepts beyond the possible, in which the eternal topic of Eros and Thanatos is examined under very different aspects. Apart from numerous cast changes – for example, Simon Keenlyside as the Count in *Figaro* and Genia Kühmeier as the Countess, Gerald Finley as Don Giovanni and Erwin Schrott not only as Leporello, but also as Figaro – there will be a musical novelty amounting to a small revolution. This time, the orchestra pit at the Haus für Mozart will feature not only the Vienna Philharmonic; it will continue to perform *Don Giovanni* under the baton of Yannick Nézet-Séguin, but the two other operas

will be played by two prominent original sound ensembles: Les Musiciens du Louvre under Mark Minkowski, celebrated for their *Mitridate* in 2006 at the Residenzhof, take on *Così fan tutte*, while the Orchestra of the Age of Enlightenment under the young shooting star Robin Ticciati makes its Mozart debut in Salzburg in *Figaro*.

Will the different soundscape caused by the lower tuning and different articulation of the instruments have scenic consequences too? “Certainly,” Claus Guth smiles; “but what this means in concrete terms, we will only learn when we start our work. I am very curious!”

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