

Press Release of the Salzburg Festival, 14 February 2023

The Salzburg Festival Mourns the Death of Friedrich Cerha



Friedrich Cerha in Salzburg, Photo: SF/ Helmut Schaffler

“**Friedrich Cerha’s** contribution to new music in Austria is second to none; he was a driving force in our musical life over the past decades. His rank as a composer is entirely uncontested. As a founder of ensembles and champion of young musicians, Friedrich Cerha had a significant impact, and we owe him the profoundest respect and gratitude,” said Artistic Director Markus Hinterhäuser in a first statement.

In 1958 he founded the ensemble “die reihe” together with Kurt Schwertsik and his wife Gertraud Cerha; the ensemble made numerous guest appearances at the Salzburg Festival over the course of the next decades.

In 1965 Friedrich Cerha made his Festival debut as a conductor and violinist, performing two commemorative concerts on the 20th anniversary of Anton Webern’s death.

Five years later, one of his own compositions, *Spiegel I & IV*, was featured for the first time on the Festival’s programme, receiving enthusiastic reactions from reviewers and audiences alike.

A milestone in Festival history came in 1981: the world premiere of his opera *Baal*. The question how much right an individual has to determine their own personality within society, the decision to choose conformity or refusal, the impossibility of acting out a vital urge to pursue happiness in an increasingly managed world – all these issues are more topical than ever today. *Baal* was a triumph for Friedrich Cerha and sparked the Festival’s growing enthusiasm for new opera. “This is how to do opera today!” was the headline of the *Neues Volksblatt*. And in the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, Hans Heinz Stuckenschmidt praised the „impression of a continuous flow of inventiveness [...] over the more than two hours of its duration. Combined with such comprehensive technique, one must acknowledge that Cerha has attained a level of mastery hardly equalled in music today.”

In 1996, Hans Landesmann dedicated a seven-concert cycle to Cerha commemorating his 70th birthday, the *Project F. Cerha*. Especially the complete performance of *Spiegel I-VII* under the composer's baton at the Felsenreitschule became a memorable Festival event – an examination of human existence and reflection on the world.

In 2016 the Festival dedicated another cycle to Cerha as part of the series *Salzburg contemporary*, featuring the world premiere of *Eine blassblaue Vision {2013/14}* commissioned by the Festival: almost 20 minutes delving into a fascinating cosmos of structural perfection and unbridled passion.

“I was always a curious person, always reflecting upon my work,” Friedrich Cerha said in a conversation on the occasion of his 90th birthday. “When a composition was finished, I wanted an awareness of what actually happened in the work. That also heightened my openness for new influences.” And: “I never worked because I hoped for redemption or to bring happiness to humanity. I made music in the same way I breathed.”

This curiosity, this open-mindedness and this rejection of unthinking dogmatism were the key to the unbroken topicality of his music.

We extend our heartfelt condolences to his family, especially his wife Gertraud.



Left: 1981: Theo Adam in conversation with Friedrich Cerha on the occasion of the world premiere of *Baal*. Photo: SF/Helmut Schaffler.

Right: Theo Adam in the title role of the opera *Baal* at the 1981 Salzburg Festival. Photo: SF/Heinz Hosch.

Kind regards,
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