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Terrace Talk on the Children's Opera *Das Kind und die Zauberdinge* “It's not just a piece for children, but also about childhood.”



Left to right.: Anna Handler (conductor), Ursula Gessat (education manager, Salzburg Festival),
Giulia Giammona (director)

For the third time, the youth programme of the Salzburg Festival features a children's opera. For the second time, it is performed at the Schauspielhaus, where, as **Ursula Gessat**, the Salzburg Festival's education manager, emphasized, “real theatre, with all the technical and costume-specific possibilities,” is possible. She asked the director **Giulia Giammona** to explain their choice of Maurice Ravel's *L'Enfant et les sortilèges* for this season. “It is a very rich piece. First of all, I was fascinated by the music. I also find it totally intriguing to experience the child's voyage from the afternoon to the next morning, through its own eyes, so to speak,” she answered. The work includes many changing nuances and atmospheres, “exposing the viewer to many surprising twists and turns, and a (special) musical richness, with elements of jazz, show tunes and waltzes”.

Ursula Gessat pointed out the rich variety of characters in *L'Enfant et les sortilèges*, in which eight vocalists embody more than 20 roles. “The first thing I asked myself was: how on earth can one stage that?”, said Giulia Giammona, adding that she found it intriguing to see how Ravel dealt with the issues of double casting in his score.

She did not need to think long when Ursula Gessat asked her whether she wanted to conduct the production, the conductor **Anna Handler** said. She values Gessat's championing of the younger generation. In general, she described Ravel as an outstanding orchestrator, as

illustrated by his orchestration of Mussorgsky's *Pictures at an Exhibition*. When she learned about the reduced cast of the current arrangement by Didier Puntos, she said she "swallowed hard" at first, but now she is convinced that it will be possible to achieve the rich colours of Ravel's music – indeed, she considers it a chance to delve even deeper into its emotional content. "I like Giulia Giammona's image of a journey, because the piece goes through many metamorphoses in musical terms as well". It is interesting, according to Handler, to realize that Ravel represents the action by using specific musical intervals: "In this way, we return to the beginning at the end of the piece." The work, which took Ravel five years to compose, is among his very best works to her. Regarding its length of only 50 minutes, she said: "I think it's great he can say so much and get to the point within such a short period of time."

Ursula Gessat asked director Giulia Giammona about dealing with the story – given the transformation the child undergoes during the course of the piece, would she speak of a superannuated pedagogical model? "Our concept was to explore the characteristics of a child today," she answered. "The part I stumbled upon was the outburst of rage and the destruction of prestige objects, which symbolize the social circumstances of the time, to a certain extent. When the other characters appear, including the animals, accusing it of wrongdoing, the child realizes that its actions have an effect on others. Its rage is the hook for the postulation: be courageous, dare to go out once in a while! This includes looking at the consequences of isolation, loneliness and contact blockades which occurred during the time of the coronavirus pandemic. Encountering the group of animals leads the child to the insight: what I do matters."



Anna Handler (conductor)

Anna Handler agreed: "To me, it's important to see how we can take yesterday's stories and make them relevant now. I was very pleased that the text has been reworked in this spirit, and that it shows us: the child has courage, and does good." Asked about the various worlds the child passes through during the course of the piece, she said: "The sequence first seems like a jumble of confusing scenes, but at the same time, the child always remains the child and does not change costumes. Its good companion, so to speak, is the squirrel, whose cage represents the 'golden cage' in which the child is confined, experiencing a kind of sensory overload. Together with the colourful and glittering, yet artificial, sterile sets, this represents the time we live in, characterized by overconsumption and abundance." Musically, she also described the special moment when the sphere of the child opens towards the outside. The animals the child meets there live in a world that is in stark contrast to the nursery world. The

merging of these two spheres makes it clear that the child must take responsibility, it cannot simply return directly to its “old” world.

Anna Handler agreed that the “development of consciousness which the child undergoes” is fascinating. “The entire piece has an element of a return to the roots, due to the treatment of intervals. It’s not just a piece for children, but also about childhood. Each one of us can think about what we associate with childhood.” In musical terms, the magical word “Mama”, which the piece revolves around, is represented by “a cadence, a motif representing the mother. The last chord reunites mother and child.” Giulia Giammona added: “The piece begins and ends with the mother. She plays an important role, even though she hardly has a presence – this is also true in our production.”

Ultimately, conflicts with our parents last a lifetime – thus Anna Handler imagines the core of the story to continue. In the end, many of us do become like our own parents. Therefore, she stated: “We have managed not to portray the mother as an evil figure, but as a character who passes on her love to the child with the last of her strength. That is not a contradiction, and is reflected in the music as well.”



Giulia Giammona (director)

Asked about their joint debut last year and the importance of making musical theatre for young audiences, she added: “To me, music education forms part of the essence of my artistic being. Even when I was young, I felt the need to pass on what was on my mind. The multi-dimensionality of music, also in terms of an educational issue, has always intrigued me.” Ultimately, every piece of music is about decoding its mysteries, she added: “When you hear something with the requisite knowledge, a blurry picture suddenly comes into focus.” Therefore, she said she was delighted to be part of the Salzburg Festival’s youth programme once again this summer.

To Giulia Giammona, it is important that children can just join in, even without a “classical context”. She emphasized the importance of breaking down language barriers as well: “I think it’s great that we can present this opera in German”. She also praised the collaboration with the members of the Young Singers Project, whose active learning of the German texts she called a valuable contribution to staying in touch with the children throughout the performance. In this context, she also mentioned the Opera Camps which allowed children and teenagers to participate without fears or reservations. She described that she was also helped by a youth

education programme to find her way into opera without any previous knowledge. She considers this another advantage of the Opera Camps, where participants from all backgrounds and different nations have the opportunity to work on stories themselves and approach pieces in an active, playful manner: “You don’t have to have any special ability to understand everything.”

Photos: SF/Leo/Neumayr