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Press Text: Terrace Talk **Peter Sellars in Salzburg**

“Music attempts to translate the inaudible“



Artistic Director Markus Hinterhäuser and the director Peter Sellars © SF/Jan Friese

(SF, 19 July 2023) Before the *Ouverture spirituelle* begins with Sofia Gubaidulina's *Canticle of the Sun* and Heinrich Schütz' *Musikalische Exequien*, performed by the Los Angeles Master Chorale in a production by **Peter Sellars**, Artistic Director **Markus Hinterhäuser** described this year's concert series: "It's a very special week for us. It gives us the opportunity to set the pulse for the Festival through our programming. The idea of the *Ouverture spirituelle* was Alexander Pereira's. Instead of his focus on the four world religions, Florian Wiegand and I have chosen one particular thought for each year. This year, the overarching motto is 'Lux aeterna', exploring the longing, the plea for eternal light as part of 'communio', the liturgical mass for the dead. In the best and most rewarding case, this exploration of a deeply-felt longing for a hereafter can also open a metaphysical space. It's the central question posed by Leibniz: 'Why is there something, rather than nothing?' For me as a musician, this leads to a very interesting situation: light does not work without darkness, and that is an essential antagonism. Light is something you cannot hear, but music keeps making fascinating attempts to translate the inaudible. That is a fantastic process, and this longing reached one of its peaks during the romantic era. That brings a quote by Friedrich Schlegel to mind: 'Pure music is one with the revelation of light.' This leads us to profound questions such as: why do we exist? Where do we come from? What is the meaning of this existence at whose mercy we are? Where do we transcend the boundaries of sensual experience?"

On the opening night of the *Ouverture spirituelle*, the antagonism between darkness and light plays a major role, as Markus Hinterhäuser explained: the programme “describes a large, fairly extreme aggregate state.” Concerning the importance of Peter Sellars’ work in Salzburg, he said: “Peter Sellars has been a friend of the Festival for 30 years. During these years of presence and friendship, he has become part of the spiritual centre of the Salzburg Festival.”

Regarding the beginning of his Festival history, Peter Sellars recounted: “I came here 30 years ago with Olivier Messiaen’s *Saint François d’Assise*”. He explained that other composers, such as Sofia Gubaidulina, worked on Messiaen as well, and described her *Canticle of the Sun* as “this beautiful song that moves across time and space and into your daily life. She has made something that is shimmering and alive, that cuts through the flesh and opens every part of you, and another world rushes in. It’s music of such incredible extasy, surrender and wildness. The whole piece is a kind of ritual calling the sun: how do you bring a new day into being? What brings the sun back? This prayer is a very special form of prayer, and Gubaidulina has chosen the cello, an instrument of darkness, to open it into an instrument of light – and this is the light in darkness that Markus Hinterhäuser was speaking about. She takes the cello, this heartfelt instrument of darkness that we know from the Bach suites, and surrounds them with a chorus. Percussion is there, with the cello to crack open everything that is closed.”

The second half of the programme is one he has been working on during the last three years of the pandemic, Peter Sellars went on, explaining that alongside Bach, the music of Schütz already played an important role in his life in his early twenties in Boston, where he worked with a church choir. “During the lockdown, there was suddenly a state of silence and stillness. And I began to listen to all of Schütz, coming upon these *Musikalische Exequien*, and I thought this was the music for this moment. In the 17th century, as during the pandemic, due to the Thirty Years’ War and the outbreak of the plague, it was no longer possible to perform large-scale works. The result is a modest little setting for a small group of singers mourning a friend – and you have the first German Requiem.”

Regarding his programmatic associations, he said: “During the pandemic, we all lost a lot of people, and none of us could say goodbye. To this day, nobody knows how to talk about it. Our inability to talk about it, the pretence that we are back to normal – for these last two years, I have wanted to make a ceremony for the people we lost and could not say goodbye to. The music of Schütz created a place we didn’t have during this time.” In the various recordings of Schütz’ *Exequien*, the piece takes about 35 minutes – in this performance as part of the *Ouverture spirituelle*, it will be approximately 80. “If you’re singing the music at the pace as you’re saying goodbye to someone, that becomes very powerful; it gains a lot of spaciousness and silence,” Sellars explained. He was enthusiastic about the soloists: “Julia Hagen is beyond belief! She is just spectacular. She pours her whole being into this music.” He described the two percussionists as having “the craziest job”, given the demands of the *Canticle of the Sun*: “Sofia Gubaidulina is always asking for more than you think you can give. When you find that in yourself to give it, something amazing happens.”



Peter Sellars © SF/Jan Frieze

Markus Hinterhäuser emphasized once more how important, even life-changing Peter Sellars' production of Messiaen's *Saint François d'Assise* had been for him, helping him realize what musical theatre can convey. He then discussed Sellars' "highly acclaimed, important production" of Henry Purcell's *The Indian Queen* in Madrid, which will be given a concert performance at this year's Festival. "Purcell is one of the composers who have this spiritual energy," said Sellars. "His life work was to revive music, which had been forbidden in England due to Puritan influence for two entire generations, and make it audible again. Then there were restrictions due to war and pandemics, so a lot of this music is a cappella and for small groups of people. Purcell died at 35, while he was writing *The Indian Queen*, and there's not even a record of the first performance. When Teodor Currentzis and I first met, he asked me whether I knew Purcell's *Indian Queen*. I was obsessed with *The Indian Queen* in my twenties, and Currentzis had encountered it through the Russian filmmaker Andrey Tarkovsky, who used baroque music in many of his films, and in whose film *Mirror* the orchestra plays the last song from Purcell's *Indian Queen*. Since the opera is unfinished, we used the content of Purcell's operas *King Arthur* and *The Fairy Queen* for guidance. In addition, Teodor got an overview of Purcell's entire theatre music and his sacred works too, so we completed the score."

About the text of the version he created, Sellars said: "The original libretto is horrible, so I chose a novel by the Nicaraguan writer Rosario Aguilar, who wrote a novel about women in the Spanish invasion of Latin America. It tells the story about an Indian woman whose love for a conquistador was bitterly disappointed. So we have a completely new plot with many connections to our own lifetime, but it lets Purcell's music have its emotional range. In the final piece, one of the greatest arias ever written – sung in our case by Jeanine de Bique – there is a big section where the singer is silent and the orchestra plays, and you hear this huge, beautiful version for strings that echoes Tarkovsky's *Mirror*."

He described his own work less as directing than searching for and finding emotional states. His work with the singers and on the text version is highly emotional – and the result thus invisible, but it will be heard and felt. There will be elements of dance and acting: "Sofia Gubaidulina makes light visible in her music; she gives her own directions through the cello part. Schütz achieves great physical effect through his use of the chorus, and the production is very detailed here. The high intensity of musical forms being transformed into an additional dimension will be visible."