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Press Text: Terrace Talk *The Greek Passion* “Martinů’s Music is a Plea for Humanity”



Maxime Pascal (Conductor), Simon Stone (Director)

(SF, 8 August 2023) For the first time in its history, the Salzburg Festival presents Bohuslav Martinů’s opera *The Greek Passion* this year. In his third production in Salzburg, following Aribert Reimann’s *Lear* and Luigi Cherubini’s *Médée*, Simon Stone explores this “extremely important musical masterwork,” as Artistic Director Markus Hinterhäuser called it. Maxime Pascal makes his debut conducting the Vienna Philharmonic, and Markus Hinterhäuser emphasized the major works he has already conducted in Salzburg, including Wolfgang Rihm’s *Jakob Lenz* and Arthur Honegger’s *Jeanne d’Arc au bûcher*.

“I encountered with Martinů during my studies at the Paris Conservatory,” Pascal described his approach to Martinů’s oeuvre. “Many of my friends played his chamber music works. Gradually, I got to know his symphonic music and operas, which have numerous parallels with French impressionist repertoire. His music has illuminated, colourful, but also dream-like characteristics.” In his opinion, the music in *The Greek Passion* cannot be assessed without taking into account the twofold historical background: “On the one hand, there is the background of the Greek village with a Christian-Orthodox congregation in Anatolia, where the performers for a passion play are chosen every seven years. On the other hand, there is the second congregation of the refugees who have been driven from their village, seeking asylum in the first village, but are again driven out from there. The merging of political and religious events causes the conflict – and everything essential for understanding the music derives from this constellation.”

Simon Stone remarked upon the content of the piece: "Another aspect important for understanding it is that Martinů himself was a refugee, and that is own artistic options after World War II were very limited. He had to ask for asylum himself – and you can hear in the music how important Kazantzakis' tale was to him, a writer who spent a lot of time exploring the issues of statelessness and homelessness. This made it a piece that is both timeless and modern. And that also makes it relevant to us today. What Kazantzakis wrote was amplified by Martinů through his music, which combines archetypal and modern forms. It has a message for all of us."



Simon Stone (Director)

Maxime Pascal describes the musical diversity of the piece, with its allusions to Czech, Byzantine and Orthodox hymns: "Martinů's interest in spirituality and dreams played an important role for this opera. That is also reflected in his musical approach, which includes western Christian and Anatolian melodies as well as dream elements reminiscent of Messiaen. The score itself suggests two aspects: on the one hand a connection between the religious, the spiritual and antiquity, on the other that spatial dimension. There are two choruses, the chorus of the local villagers already installed on stage, and the chorus of the refugees, which is first heard only from a distance. It gradually approaches the stage, but ultimately returns to where it came from. This musical description of space is central to this piece. This is something Simon was able to implement in a very particular way here at the Felsenreitschule."

To Simon Stone, the stage effect of the chorus flows naturally from the treatment of drama and gesture inherent in the piece. "You just have to listen," he said, referring to the special acoustic characteristics of the Felsenreitschule and pointing out Markus Hinterhäuser's unerring intuition that this was the right performance venue for the piece. Asked about the concept of implementation, he said: "Martinů's musical expression is so direct that one does not have to think about it too long. His musical statements and stylistic means offer the director a key." He is convinced of the piece's effectiveness: "I think that many people will be surprised, asking: why is this work not a regular part of the repertoire? I think Maxime Pascal is exactly the right conductor to bring out this aspect. Filtering the essential passages from the scores of the various versions was also part of our work."

A conscious transposition into the present times was not even necessary, Simon Stone declared: "A classic must be framed over and over. When you have a little-known work such

as *The Greek Passion*, where the audience does not have any pre-conceived expectations, my job is rather to turn it into a classic."

Regarding the instrumentation, Maxime Pascal said: "One special feature of Martinů's orchestration is that he always has the winds play in groups of three. The focus is less on the soloistic element than on a form of unison. A second characteristic is the resulting folkloristic sound elements, some of them resembling Central Italian or Greek melodies. This creates a very luminous, Mediterranean impression. This, in turn, is in strong contrast with the human brutality and violence depicted in the story. The sunnier and brighter the music, the more the catastrophic tragedy of the story is thrown into relief. He manages to expose this so relentlessly through his special treatment of the instruments."



Maxime Pascal (Conductor)

Simon Stone considers the religious background of the libretto important: "The figures of Manolios and Grigoris illustrate the contrast of how much power religion can have on the one hand, and an individual person such as the priest – especially within the structures of a village – on the other hand." At the same time, he added, the point is to explore boundaries and the discrepancy between the suppression of generosity that today's politics demand, and an intuitive human willingness to help: "Martinů's music contradicts this attempted suppression – it is a plea for humanity."

As reasons for their decision to use the Zurich version of the work, Maxime Pascal and Simon Stone said that compared to the London version, it seemed more intuitive, spontaneous and straightforward.

The premiere takes place on 13 August at the Felsenreitschule. Three further performances of the opera *The Greek Passion*, based on Nikos Kazantzakis' novel *Christ Recrucified*, follow through 27 August 2023.

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