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**Press Text: Terrace Talk *The Idiot*
“Beauty as a means of saving the world”**



Mirga Gražinytė-Tyla (conductor), Krzysztof Warlikowski (director),
Bogdan Volkov (who sings the role of Prince Lev Nikolayevich Myshkin)

(SF, 23 July 2024) It's not one of the great “blockbusters” of the operatic repertoire, Mieczysław Weinberg's *The Idiot*, says **Artistic Director Markus Hinterhäuser** during the introductions. The work has only been performed three times, once in an abridged version in Moscow, once during the actual world premiere in Mannheim, and then at the Theater an der Wien. Even during his tenure as artistic director of the Wiener Festwochen, Hinterhäuser had dedicated an entire series to Weinberg. To him, giving this composer, who is so emblematic for the catastrophes of the 20th century, the place he deserves in music history is an important goal.

The Idiot is presented in a new production this year at the Salzburg Festival, with **Krzysztof Warlikowski** directing his fourth work here. The word “idiot”, he points out, has quite a provocative connotation, with a demeaning aspect, in various languages, including in Russian. “Dostoyevsky, however, created a far more complex character; for him, ‘idiot’ is rather a limiting term for a prophetic character – for someone who speaks the truth, who has a higher sensitivity and a special gift, compared to others. Someone who has an external rather than an internal view of things,” says Warlikowski. The character has a mythological element, something that triggers feelings of love in other people – which can even wreak change and evil for other

people, as manifested at the end of the piece. “The figure of the outsider also has Christian connotations. He confronts the world with itself, so to speak, foretelling coming catastrophes,” Warlikowski explains further.



Krzysztof Warlikowski (director)

Mirga Gražinytė-Tyla makes her debut at the helm of the Vienna Philharmonic this year, having won the Young Conductors Award in Salzburg in 2012. Asked to characterize Weinberg’s music, she says: „Weinberg’s music clearly suggests that he wanted to lift Dostoyevsky’s complex world to another, even more complex level. At the same time, this takes us back to the simplest truths. What Weinberg does in terms of motifs in this work is incredible: for example, he went back to Wagner’s system, but multiplied by several factors. There are connections with other motifs in almost every measure, with a ‘leitrythmus’ or a ‘leitharmonie’. Some of these references can be found even before the character’s name is mentioned. The music contains an incredible number of subtexts regarding the characters’ relationships with each other.”

Bogdan Volkov has appeared at the Salzburg Festival several times, for example in last year’s *Falstaff* or the 2020 *Così fan tutte*. “To me, this is the largest role so far, and it’s a wonderful experience. I am very grateful for the musical support we receive here, as it is not an easy opera,” he says about the role of Prince Lev Nikolayevich Myshkin. The Prince’s character embodies two aspects to him – that of beauty as a means of saving the world, and compassion as the only valid law of human existence. The suffering Weinberg himself experienced during his imprisonment during the Stalin regime and the Holocaust make these two notions deeply meaningful to him: “Especially in the world we currently live in, this opera is a very significant work,” says Volkov.

Asked how, in his opinion, compassion and empathy are reflected in the character of Prince Myshkin, Warlikowski explains: “Human nature is not to be evil. After the war, everyone tried to achieve catharsis, to create a better world. This is exactly the progress we have failed to make – on the contrary, we have regressed. We are moving, if you will, exactly on the line between a dark and a bright light. Compassion is something that lives within us. Art is something often appropriated for political purposes. Art, however, is essential, in my opinion, in order to heal ourselves and restore our equilibrium.”



Mirga Gražinytė-Tyla (Musikalische Leitung)

When asked about the relationship of the opera and religious thoughts, Warlikowski points out parallels with Shakespeare characters such as Ariel from *The Tempest*, a light-filled figure which is not as close to the darkness of Dostoyevsky's text as to Wittgenstein's philosophy. "Personally, I believe more in humanity than in religion, in figures whose calling it is to startle us awake and illuminate us."

Mirga Gražinytė-Tyla points out the parallels between the character of Prince Myshkin and Weinberg: "Just as Myshkin arrives from Switzerland by train, Weinberg also arrived by train in Moscow. There are further parallels in the naming of the figure in whom Weinberg recognized his own character traits. In his work, Weinberg tries to express his gratitude at having survived. The ambiguities and the life stories of Myshkin and Weinberg himself have a lot of aspects in common."

Gražinytė-Tyla does not consider it a disadvantage that there are hardly any reference productions because the opera has been presented so rarely so far: "I consider this a great task and a great challenge. A lack of tradition can also offer a certain relief. If you have been studying the work as intensively as we have been lately, you realize that there are a lot of places the piece itself is leading us." Compared to Weinberg's opera *The Passenger*, which she has also conducted this year, *The Idiot* is more immediately striking. Despite the darkness of Dostoyevsky's text and the wealth of tragic and dramatic events, it contains many elements of light and joy. Warlikowski compares both operas as follows: "*The Passenger* was an opera Weinberg had to write for himself, to come to terms with the past. In *The Idiot*, Weinberg tries to make peace with himself and his life."



Bogdan Volkov (Fürst Lew Nikolajewitsch Myschkin)

Regarding the Felsenreitschule as a venue where he has repeatedly directed, he adds: “These huge spaces open up possibilities for a new artistic language; they transport a special energy.”

Photo link: <https://www.salzburgerfestspiele.at/en/photos/the-idiot-2024>

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