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## Press Text: Terrace Talk *The Gambler* “Healing wounds with art.”



From left: Asmik Grigorian (Polina), Peter Sellars (director), Sean Panikkar (Alexey Ivanovich)

(SF, 5 August 2024) Sergey Prokofiev’s first opera, also the first opera ever to be based on a literary model by Dostoyevsky, is on this year’s summer programme in Salzburg: *The Gambler*. Director **Peter Sellars** begins by expressing his gratitude for the fact that in **Asmik Grigorian** and **Sean Panikkar**, he can work with two outstanding artists far removed from any cliché. “The piece is about an angry young character who represents a generation rising up against the ruling establishment, questioning a system in which the government and capitalism destroy everything.” He finds all this reflected in Prokofiev’s music, whose tempo and directness he can only compare to Mozart’s *Le nozze di Figaro*. “As in Mozart, you hardly ever get a break in Prokofiev: one event chases the next, tragedy and comedy, the highs and lows of life are very close together. In the end, however, ultimately love is the only thing that counts,” says Sellars about the work and its rapid succession of scenes, in which new characters keep appearing just as quickly.

This is not the first time Asmik Grigorian is taking on the role of Polina. Asked how Sellars’ concept differs from the last production she sang it in, she says: “In everything. From beginning to end, it is a very different production.” It is the first time she is working with Sellars: “That’s something special for me, I am very happy about this encounter. He never says, ‘I think’ or ‘I

believe', but always 'I feel'." Describing his working method, she adds: „To me, this is the highest level of art.”

Asked how he is dealing with the challenge of his central role [of Alexey Ivanovich], Sean Panikkar says: “In the beginning, I had trouble warming to the score. That, however, has changed gradually, through work with Peter Sellars.” He has also read Dostoyevsky’s complex novel. When Sellars tapped him for the role, he was immediately interested, because viewing the piece through Sellars’ eyes makes the obscure relationships between the characters understandable: “It is these very relationships that Sellars makes plausible, he fills them with emotions, with real life.” In this way, even people who have no connection with the piece could really get to know and love it – as Panikkar himself did.



Sean Panikkar (who sings the role of Alexey Ivanovich)

Sellars values the working conditions in Salzburg particularly: “From the outset, you start here at an incredibly high level – whether regarding the artists or the set design. That is the foundation for working on a high level, and opens up additional artistic freedoms.” About the connection between the work and our present time, he says: “The piece lay fallow for about 70 years. During the Soviet era, everything it contained in the way of creativity, eroticism and economic criticism fell victim to censorship. Today, we are able to allow all those aspects to breathe freely again.” He considers it a great privilege to be able to portray the generational conflict inherent in the piece with the relatively young artists of this cast, making it particularly convincing. The violence which confronts us in the piece is still present, in his view: “However, we do not want to tear open new wounds, but to heal them with art.”

Asked how she is faring with the human weaknesses of the characters and the maelstrom of emotions surrounding them, Grigorian says: “For Polina especially, the greatest conflict is her relationship with herself. For me personally, I find that very relatable, as I also am in continuous conflict with myself. I recognize myself in her character, so portraying the role comes easy to me in that sense.” About Polina, she adds: “To me, it’s a very interesting role. At the same time, it has the advantage that I don’t have to take extra time over the language, and in terms of length, it is not quite as challenging as Lady Macbeth, Salome or the roles in *Il tritico* which I’ve sung in Salzburg.”



Asmik Grigorian (who sings the role of Polina)

About the supposed language barrier with Russian, respectively its sonority in music, Sean Panikkar says: "I may not be able to speak Russian or read Cyrillic, but thanks to a good transliteration, good coaching and lots of practice, it's possible to pick all this up." An accomplishment Asmik Grigorian admires, given the large amount of text his role has. Sellars comments on the libretto: "As in all operas with a lot of text, here it's only in the context of the music that you realize how full of life and stories, how rich the piece is." It is in this richness, the possibility of allowing emotions to be experienced through music, not merely through what is said, bringing them to life on stage, in which he sees the beauty of opera as an art form.

Asmik Grigorian has previously worked with the conductor Timur Zangiev, who makes his debut both in Salzburg and at the helm of the Vienna Philharmonic in this production. "Despite his youth, he is an experienced conductor. He knows every detail." Sean Panikkar agrees: "He knows exactly what he wants, but at the same time, he is very cooperative. He knows the score inside out."

Asked what he would like the audience to take away from his staging, Sellars says: "It's hard to pick out one single aspect. It's always about finding oneself and becoming conscious of things we might have been carrying around with us, but not recognized so far – about entering new spheres."



Peter Sellars (director)

All three agree about the special qualities of Salzburg as an artistic location: "To me, the people I work with here, the love I experience from colleagues and audience, are very special.

Whenever I come here, my energy level rises.” The “unique repertoire created by Markus Hinterhäuser in Salzburg“, the “fantastic working atmosphere, the history and the beauty of the city” are what Sean Panikkar values in Salzburg. And Peter Sellars emphasizes the unique qualities of the Felsenreitschule as a performance venue: “You’re not simply at a theatre there – you’re in a different kind of sphere. That’s the reason I like working there so much.”

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

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