



SALZBURGER  
FESTSPIELE  
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## **“What can music tell us about being human?”**

### **Press Text: Terrace Talk about the Performance of Hans Werner Henze’s Oratorio *The Raft of the Medusa***



Conductor Ingo Metzmacher und Georg Nigl (Jean-Charles)

(SF, 18 July 2025) Hans Werner Henze’s oratorio, written towards the end of the 1960s, is based on the true story of a tragic shipwreck off the coast of West Africa in 1816.

Conductor Ingo Metzmacher knew the composer well: he conducted the world premieres of Henze’s Ninth Symphony and *Requiem*, and he revised his Sixth Symphony with him. The first time he conducted a work by Henze was in Cologne in 1994 – in the composer’s presence. About the musical structure and content of *Das Floß der Medusa* (*The Raft of the Medusa*), Metzmacher said: “The opening words of the narrator are very characteristic – he says: ‘We speak with two voices’ – there is a world of the living and a world of the dead. As instructed in the score, the dead sing from the left side of the stage together with the strings, and the living on the right side are embodied by the breathing of the winds and brass.” At the Felsenreitschule, Metzmacher adds, this spatial relation becomes particularly well visible, compared to most regular concert halls.

Asked about the monumental cast and the nature of the character of Jean-Charles, his role, Georg Nigl said: "His function is to witness the story. My intense study of the piece moved me deeply; one cannot fail to be touched by its effect and the issues it broaches. Indeed, these twelve days at sea are about sheer survival, and I hope that the people listening to this performance will take part of its message away with them." This seems particularly important to him with a view to history: "Henze and his librettist experienced the horrors of World War II personally. They were witnesses to a time which is increasingly being lost to our memory. This makes this work all the more important: the catastrophe it recounts happened as early as 1816, but it still drives our human inadequacies home to us."

According to Henze's biographer Jens Rosteck, *Das Floß der Medusa* hovers somewhere "between a cantata, a Bach passion and a contemporary, timeless parable", and Metzmacher commented on its structure: "In the beginning, the living sing on the right side, to the sound of the strings, in German. As soon as the characters move to the left, towards death, they start singing passages from Dante's *Divine Comedy* in Italian. Every time this happens, the music becomes particularly beautiful. In the second part, the setup changes; there, we have a large chorus of the dead, a kind of chamber chorus of the dying, and a chorus of the living. Henze is not only out to document the horror of the story, but also to depict the world of death, which none of us knows and which is represented by the solo soprano voice."

Metzmacher described the role of the Narrator in the piece: "He speaks mainly in free prose, but occasionally also in rhythm, in conjunction with the percussion, which offers an instrumental characterization. The figure of Jean-Charles is represented by the winds and brass, the voice of death by the strings."

The shipwrecking incident became known, said Georg Nigl, mainly due to the 1819 painting by Théodore Géricault, which is exhibited at the Louvre today and played an important role in its commemoration. Given the tumult which *Das Floß der Medusa* caused at its world premiere, Nigl emphasized that he thinks provocation is not the main goal of music. He prefers to focus on the central content it conveys, and most importantly, on moving people. Metzmacher too is convinced: "I strongly believe that Henze's goal with this piece was to shake people awake and point out critical circumstances, such as still exist today: when things get rough, those who can save themselves. The others are left to their own devices."

Both artists pointed out the musical challenges. Thus, Nigl, for example, commented on the role of Jean-Charles: "It extends over two and a half octaves and is very difficult to sing. Its preparation takes a lot of time." At the same time, to him it is equal to such major works of the 20<sup>th</sup> century as Berg's *Wozzeck* and Luigi Dallapiccola's *Il Prigioniero*. Metzmacher agreed: "The work has a very large cast and is demanding – the physical score has the largest dimensions of any I own." The spatial division of the two groups of voices is difficult to implement, as he pointed out – but here, the performance venue is well-suited to the task: "In Salzburg, anything is possible, after all."

Asked about the character of his role, Nigl said: "Jean-Charles is a portrait of a highly traumatized person, who ultimately decides who may survive and who may not. Laws no longer apply in this constellation; there are places in the work which ask profound philosophical questions. It traces the outer limit of our psychological compatibility with society – that is one of the reasons it is a masterwork."

The Festival's Artistic Director Markus Hinterhäuser sees this first-ever performance of the work in Salzburg as part of the continuity of new spaces for thought he has dedicated the beginning of the *Ouverture spirituelle* to, seeking answers to the question: "What can music tell us about being human and the geography of our existence?"

Photo: © SF/Jan Frieze

## **The Raft of the Medusa**

**Oratorio for Soprano, Baritone, Narrator, Mixed Chorus and Orchestra**

Fri, 18 July, 7 pm

Felsenreitschule

**Kathrin Zukowski** La Mort

**Georg Nigl** Jean-Charles

**Udo Samel** Charon

**Chorus of the Bavarian Radio**

**Max Hanft** Chorus Master

**Chorus of the Living**

Nicolas Ries, Benedikt Weiß, Michael Mantaj, Ho Nam Gabriel Sin,

Anna-Maria Pali, Diana Fischer, Moon Yung Oh, Anna Molnár,

Mareike Braun, Veronika Sammer, Timo Janzen, Julia Price,

Andrew Lepri Meyer, Q-Won Han

**WDR Radio Chorus**

**Paul Krämer, Alexander Lüken** Chorus Masters

**Chorus of the Dead**

Benita Borbonus, Insun Min, Inga Balzer-Wolf, Gun Young An, Aurélie Franck,

Cordelia Weil, Dalila Djeni, Joachim Streckfuß, You Zuo, Kwon-Shik Lee,

Thomas Jakobs, Johannes Hill, Clemens Joswig

**Salzburger Festspiele und Theater Kinderchor**

**Wolfgang Götz, Regina Sgier** Chorus Masters

**ORF Radio Symphony Orchestra Vienna**

**Ingo Metzmacher** Conductor

Photo link:

<https://www.salzburgerfestspiele.at/fotoservice/terrassentalk-das-floss-der-medusa>

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