



Press Release of the Salzburg Festival, 8 September 2025

The Salzburg Festival Mourns the Death of Christoph von Dohnányi



Christoph von Dohnányi during his last appearance at the Salzburg Festival on 7 August 2014
Photo: SF/Silvia Lelli

(SF, 8 September 2025) "Christoph von Dohnányi was a specialist for many styles, a grand seigneur among the great international conductors to whom the Salzburg Festival owes its world reputation. Between 1962 and 2014, he led many unforgettable opera and concert performances here," declared the Festival's Artistic Director Markus Hinterhäuser upon hearing of Christoph von Dohnányi's passing.

For more than five decades, Christoph von Dohnányi made Festival history. In addition to the great operas by Strauss and Mozart and numerous concerts with the Vienna Philharmonic as well as two orchestras whose chief conductor he was, the Cleveland Orchestra and the Philharmonia Orchestra London, he also conducted the world premieres of Hans Werner Henze's *Die Bassariden* and Friedrich Cerha's *Baal*.

Von Dohnányi made his Festival debut in 1962, in a serenade concert with the Mozarteum Orchestra Salzburg. In 1966, this debut was followed by the world premiere of *Die Bassariden*. Norbert Tschulnik wrote enthusiastically in the *Wiener Zeitung*: "Christoph von Dohnányi led the work as a conductor who is open to novelty, wise and musical as well."

In 1981, the production of Friedrich Cerha opera *Baal* became a sensational success under his baton. "Truly a masterwork," the *Wiener Kurier's* headline ran. With both world premieres, Christoph von Dohnányi made an essential contribution to championing musical modernism, which was always close to his heart, at the Salzburg Festival.

Nor did von Dohnányi shy away from conflict – for example during a production of Béla Bartók's *Bluebeard's Castle* and Arnold Schoenberg's *Erwartung*, the highlight of the 1995 Festival. Gerhard R. Koch noted in the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*: "Christoph von Dohnányi worked hard with the Vienna Philharmonic, not eschewing conflict. The results prove him right: the orchestra has rarely been heard in such fabulous form, including the necessary sharpness of tone; many details, both in Bartók and Schoenberg, have never been heard in such clarity; the compositional dramaturgies were overwhelmingly clear, precisely because they had not been smoothed over."

One absolute highlight of his Festival performances was *Salome* at the beginning of the Mortier era in 1992. Audiences and reviewers were united in their enthusiasm. Klaus Jungheinrich reported on a "sensational new Strauss feeling" in the *Frankfurter Rundschau*, and Karl Harb wrote in the *Salzburger Nachrichten*: "Christoph von Dohnányi allowed the Vienna Philharmonic no false Strauss sweetness, but a blossoming sound of high erotic tension. From the first motif, he paid incredibly precise attention to details, all of which served the colours of the music, and affirmed the chamber-like nature of the piece with a concentration that highlighted the voices and expressions instead of obscuring them behind a veil of pleasant frisson."

In the summer of 2014, Christoph von Dohnányi returned to the Salzburg Festival stage one more time after a 13-year absence, leading the Philharmonia Orchestra London in Bruckner's Ninth Symphony, to the audience's delight. In total, he conducted 77 performances at the Salzburg Festival.

On Saturday, Christoph von Dohnányi died in Munich at the age of 95. The black flag flying over the Festspielhaus in Salzburg today is a symbol of grief and gratitude for Christoph von Dohnányi's work at the Salzburg Festival.