

CRITIC'S NOTEBOOK

Savage Versus Sumptuous in a Season of Viennese Opera

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VIENNA — Performances of Wagner’s “Parsifal,” with its Christian themes and Good Friday finale, start to swell toward the beginning of the year and crest in the Easter season.



Michael Poehn/Wiener Staatsoper
Christopher Ventris in the title role of “Parsifal,” on Thursday night at the Staatsoper.

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Here the opera is an annual fixture. But with Wagner’s 200th birthday coming in May, “Parsifal” has proliferated all over this year. In the last two months I’ve seen four versions in four cities, a mini-festival that culminated on Thursday with a bracingly vital [performance](#) led by Franz Welser-Möst at the [Staatsoper](#).

Vienna’s yearly runs afford the regular practice that allows this long, challenging opera to survive and even thrive with the limited rehearsal schedule that is the norm here. The Staatsoper’s administration seems almost proud of those conditions. When I spoke to Dominique Meyer, the general manager, in his office, he said that the pressure merely showed off the talents and flexibility of the Staatsoper orchestra, which overlaps considerably with the Vienna Philharmonic.

I couldn’t disagree after Thursday’s urgent “Parsifal” and a dazzlingly played performance of Berg’s “Wozzeck” the night before, also led by Mr. Welser-Möst, the Staatsoper’s music director.

In an ecstatic “Parsifal” prelude, string arpeggios glinted through arching melodies intoned by the trumpets with sober security. Later the brasses, with the forceful marcato indicated in the score, melted into a string passage of fullness and warmth that slowly vanished into nothing.

Mr. Welser-Möst’s pacing was not particularly quick but always felt urgent; the details were fascinating. The medieval-sounding horn flourish when the knight Gurnemanz invokes the dead king Titurel in his opening narration came out translucently soft, as if emerging from the distant past. Sounds moved through the orchestra with

astonishing agility; an anguished low string figure in the second act was capped, with perfect timing, by a coppery shimmer in the brasses.

The other three “Parsifal” performances I saw recently — [Thomas Hengelbrock’s](#) revelatory, Mendelssohn-light [original-instrument version](#) in Madrid; Daniele Gatti’s charismatic, continuously fluctuating eccentricity [at the Metropolitan Opera](#); and Christian Thielemann’s lyrically flowing reading [at the Salzburg Easter Festival](#) — treated the work more or less as a ritual, a precious object to be handled with delicate reverence.

Mr. Welser-Möst and the Staatsoper orchestra played it like an opera: a vibrant, immediate drama. “Parsifal” can inspire recitations, rather than inhabitations, of roles. But on Thursday a strong cast clearly responded to Mr. Welser-Möst’s conception and Christine Mielitz’s dark, grungy 2004 production. It is a less elegant show than the Met’s new “Parsifal” but more visceral and risky, with a savagely restive chorus of knights; a bloody, virile Amfortas (Tomasz Konieczny); and an oily oligarch of a Klingsor (Wolfgang Bankl, also an excellent Doctor in “Wozzeck”).

The bass Kwangchul Youn, who also sang under Mr. Hengelbrock in Madrid, was again a surpassingly eloquent Gurnemanz, each note rounded and each phrase haunted. There was a palpable sense of Kundry’s exhaustion in the soprano Evelyn Hertlitzius’s brave performance; in her furious outburst at the end of the second act, she and the orchestra combined formidably.

In the title role, the tenor Christopher Ventris was a late replacement for an ill Jonas Kaufmann. Mr. Ventris’s voice is the less distinctive of the two, but as Parsifal at the Met in February, Mr. Kaufmann paced himself cautiously and acted blankly, despite seductive baritonal colors. Mr. Ventris, sounding focused and lightly golden, sang more comfortably and found a character more overwhelmed than simply dull.

If Wednesday’s “Wozzeck” was less gripping than this as theater, it may have been even more extraordinary musically. Perhaps it was my seat — I was in a box close to the stage and directly over the pit — but I have rarely experienced an opera more dominated by the instrumentalists. The Staatsoper fielded a very good cast, led by the baritone Simon Keenlyside and the soprano Anne Schwanewilms, who is to make her Met debut in Strauss’s “Frau Ohne Schatten” in November, but the orchestra fairly blew the singers off the stage.

Not that the playing was particularly loud; it tended toward understatement. At any given moment it might even have seemed offhand, reminiscent of Mr. Welser-Möst’s cool, subtle interpretation of Strauss’s [“Salome” with the Cleveland Orchestra](#) at Carnegie Hall last year.

That performance [was criticized](#) for being lightweight, but I found it eerily enchanting. Like the “Salome,” Mr. Welser-Möst’s “Wozzeck” was as sinuous and controlled as a charmed snake. It was overpowering not in volume but in focus and pure sonic pleasure. It is a backhanded compliment — indeed, hardly a compliment at all — but it is the truth that the opera’s kaleidoscopic, expressionistic shifts were rendered so sensuously that I did not even perceive the music as atonal.

In the opening scene, Heinrich Koll’s nimble viola lines were more riveting than the onstage confrontation between the Captain and Wozzeck. In the interlude between the third and fourth scenes, the brasses were utterly confident, from whispering quiet to clarion blasts.

In the scene that followed, the filigree work in the cellos had a slender grace that turned in an instant to assertive pizzicato plucks. The orchestral outpouring that precedes the final scene was predictably sumptuous, its impact lessened only by having to compete with the luxuriousness of what had come before.

What was missing in this revival of Adolf Dresen’s 1987 production was not eye-opening music-making but just what made the “Parsifal” so memorable: a sense of the drama’s stakes.

Mr. Keenlyside, fidgety and well-meaning, was too introverted to project Wozzeck’s tragedy. In both voice and manner, Ms. Schwanewilms captured Marie’s flinty and compassionate sides, but she too seemed distant.

The smaller roles were well cast — Norbert Ernst was an acute Andres, and Monika Bohinec an earthy, rich-toned Margret (as well as a floating Voice From Above in “Parsifal”) — but nothing onstage was shattering or even disturbing.

For all its beauty, the orchestra conjured little that was shattering or disturbing, either. The strings had a tangy bite in the barracks scene at the end of Act II, but in few other places did the brilliance of the playing dovetail with the opera’s psychological or social implications.

As the orchestra, blandly authoritative, sounded the chords of the great final interlude, I wrote in my notebook, “But is it an exercise in pure sound or a reflection of a dramatic situation?”

I’m still not sure.

“Wozzeck” continues through Tuesday, and “Parsifal” through Thursday, at the Staatsoper in Vienna; wiener-staatsoper.at.

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