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By Reinhard J. Brembeck

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Salzburg Festival

Faith in sound



A great, serious show talent: the cellist Julia Hagen. (Photo: imago images/Rudolf Gigler)

The Salzburg Festival opens with three masterpieces of sacred music that are much more than brilliant concert events.

Born in the Soviet Union in 1931, Sofia Gubaidulina has long lived in exile in Germany. All of her works, like those of Olivier Messiaen, are expressively committed to truths of faith, including the "Canticle of the Sun," which sets to music the legendary hymn of Francis of Assisi; a solo cello, supported by percussionists, comments on the canticles with glosses of glissandi, vehemence, longing, insistence. This solo part was written by Gubaidulina for the great cellist Mstislav Rostropovich for his 70th birthday as a brilliant show number, including the playing of bass drum, flexaton, wind gong.

In the Kollegienkirche, the cellist Julia Hagen, also a great, serious show talent, plays musically sovereign and virtuosic. But the piece also tells of an irreconcilability, here an almost insurmountable gulf opens up between the secular extreme individualism of the soloist and the intimacy of the choir, the Los Angeles Master Chorale, which Grant Gershon leads to brilliant sonority. Individual and collective, the piece's subtext suggests, can no longer be reconciled today. The social utopian Peter Sellars searches for a better form of human coexistence.

Grant Gershon's LA Master Chorale then makes an even stronger impression in the Schütz "Exequien," a funeral three-parter. Gershon and his ensemble focus entirely on internalization, on mourning captured in sound. The sounds flow through the Kollegienkirche very slowly, but always lightly and always underpinned with hope. It is all the more impressive that the singers as well as the conductor make music from memory, not least because Peter Sellars stages these "Exequien".

More than 30 years ago, Peter Sellars celebrated a sensational success at the Festival with Olivier Messiaen's giant opera "Saint François d'Assise". As always later, even then he offered more than a perfectly crafted evening of opera, but celebrated reconciliation, hope, spiritual redemption through art. The social utopian Sellars is always looking for a better form of human coexistence, and this is also the case in the "Exequien". For this he needs only a minimum of equipment, light and everyday costumes. The LA Master Chorale sits opposite a table on which individual singers lie down, mourned by another chorus member. The interaction between the singers is affectionate, full of attention and respect. In this way, the evening is certainly reminiscent of a free church service, but it lacks proselytism as much as it lacks a sense of mission. Sellars reinforces the approach of conductor Grant Gershon, who, with great movements and without any fanaticism, transforms the sadness of the piece into hope. His singers eschew any harshness, any arty self-promotion/showmanship.

Everything is warmth, radiance and emotion. Through this, this magnificent choir succeeds in the miracle of discovering comfort in mourning and conveying it. The few expressive gestures with the hands called for by Sellars, the stretching of the bodies, the alternation between lying, standing and sitting, all intensify this work of mourning. Sellars does not provide an interpretation. He deepens the music, he opens the audience's understanding and listening to the humanism of the music through the spare gestures. Thus the combination Messiaen/Gubaidulina/Schütz at the opening of the Salzburg Festival comes across not only as a concert highlight, but as a trinity of meaning in a hopeless world.