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The great Los Angeles Master Chorale under Grant Gershon singing the sun.

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Praise to God and the beautiful corpse at the "Ouverture spiritual"

Enthusiasm for music by Olivier Messiaen, Sofia Gubaidulina and Henrich Schütz at the start of the Salzburg "Ouverture Spiritual" - with Ingo Metzmacher, Julia Hagen and Peter Sellars.

First pure sound theatre: a complex, meditative imagination of the hereafter, the mystical introspection of the ultimate, also presented with enormous orchestral forces. Then, elsewhere, a delicate transition into the scenic. Choir, percussion and a cello: a prayer, a solemn rite, ancient and modern at the same time. Finally a community, people singing. Above all, farewells, always farewells – in mourning, but celebrated without despair. Love wins after all, this is the message.

Officially there were two events, but connoisseurs of course treated themselves to everything at this opening of the "Ouverture spiritual" of the Salzburg Festival - a three-part evening at two venues, with a Parsifalesque playing time that ultimately lasted almost five and a half hours. An ordeal for the audience? No: For whoever followed the whole thing attentively, the time experienced shrank miraculously.

"Lux aeterna": This year's "Ouverture" is dedicated to the eternal light that may shine on the deceased. At the beginning "Éclairs sur l'Au-delà . . ." in the Felsenreitschule, i.e. "Stripes of light over the hereafter": Olivier Messiaen's last major orchestral work, the premiere of which he did not live to see in 1992. It beguiles with a subtly mixed, dazzling array of colors and forms in eleven movements - from wordless chorales to ethereal tenderness, from flashes of terror to the praise of the birds, led by the magnificent Australian lyrebird. Ingo Metzmacher mixed all of this with the sonorous and virtuosic SWR orchestra with a love of detail, without losing the overriding calm: splendid!

Magic of wanting to hold on

In the Collegiate Church Sofia Gubaidulina's "Canticle of the Sun", St Francis of Assisi's praise of creation with "Brother Sun" and "Sister Moon", ceremoniously led by the solo cello with percussion accompaniment. It was Julia Hagen's greatest performance at the Festival to date: not only did she have a flawless, slender, singing tone, but she also had a convincing expression as a dignified high priestess who also played the gong and flexatone from time to time. Plus Christoph Sietzen and Bogdan Bacanu as subtle percussionists – and the great Los Angeles Master Chorale conducted by Grant Gershon.

The highest level of spiritual peaks could then be climbed: with the "Musical Exequien" by Heinrich Schütz (1636). Anyone who heard this funeral music from last summer under John Eliot Gardiner would hardly have recognized it. Director Peter Sellars and Gershon present the work at a tempo that is reduced by a good half compared to historical performance practice. Nevertheless (or exactly because of that) the thing carried – and didn't become too ponderous due to the delicate, light choral sound.

Of course, greetings of peace are exchanged, hands wringed like in a US revivalist church. There is crouching, hugging, walking, suffering. In the duets – not all the solo parts showed the same quality – one or the other always lies down on a table: final encounters on the deathbed. An amazing side effect of the slowness: Even the individual pieces of this large-scale celebration of farewell seem to be infinite. As early as the third or penultimate phrase with the following caesura, one feels a final effect when listening, which is not yet redeemed: a symbol of the need to extend the moment, to want to hold on to the loved one, not to lose them. Not now. This developed an intimate, quiet, simple power.