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The Only Air Worth Breathing is the Love of Mankind

It was a long time ago: over forty years ago, the Italian director and genius Giorgio Strehler presented two great evenings of Shakespeare in Milan, *The Throne and the People* and *The War of the Roses: Red Rose – White Rose*. These performances were presented hundreds of times at the *Piccolo Teatro*. In 1973, the *Felsenreitschule* saw an extended version of these evenings, which later traveled to the *Burgtheater* as well. It was one of the greatest success stories in the Festival's history – and Strehler told me that it was also one of his best times as a director, here in Salzburg. We borrowed the grandiose title of these performances for this summer: *Das Spiel der Mächtigen – The Game of the Mighty*.

“What Strehler is interested in is the parallelogram of power,” Kurt Kahl wrote at the time, “the tension between nobility and commoners.” This “parallelogram of power” will also be the focus of our program: this “*Game of the Mighty*” is also a game with the mighty and a play about the mighty. Like Strehler, we do not wish to be “lawyers and accountants”, but we want our operas, plays, concerts to impress people on their own terms, to be human “parables, symbols and truths at the same time”. However, power and repression are not games – and the abuse of power not a trifle. Repression is ubiquitous, everywhere, thousands of years ago and the day before yesterday, yesterday, today and – to our horror! – tomorrow too!

“Oh what joy, in the open air” the prisoners in *Fidelio* sing when they leave their cells to walk in the prison yard – it is the essential air of freedom, without which human life remains a mere fragment and undignified refuse. The longing for liberation, for self-determination is unquenchable, as literature, music and history have shown us often enough: what a topic!

“Man in revolt,” as Wolf Lepenies writes in his essay, “is the man who says no.” And ever so often, a word, like the word in the dream of Brecht's *Joan*, is enough to turn a quivering beginning into an unstoppable movement and soon thereafter into an enormous, self-replicating avalanche, ending in the chaos of revolt:

“Through the addition of a word, called out somewhere, / With indifferent content, it began to flow. / Now I saw trains, streets, ... / Saw you march... / Calling to everything that looks like a person,” thus *Joan* describes the beginning of the great revolts in Chicago.

What power lies within a determined individual: just consider *Leonore* in *Fidelio*. “Let not the last bright star in my anguish be obscured,” she begs of hope, singing about herself, her beloved husband and all those who languish and die in *Pizarro's* dungeon. “For this wide and aroused heart – drunk with solidarity – the only air worth breathing is the love of mankind,” we hear in Nono's opera *Al gran sole carico d'amore*.

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This is the motivation for a multitude of actions in our pieces, reasons that we already find in the Old Testament of a rather angry Jewish God. Judith also says no to Holofernes, no to the suppression of her people, and thus she beheads him: this no, this indignation, is the old story; the struggle for air and for the hope that everything may change! But paradise on earth is far away and the way there is paved not only with good intentions, but also with enormous obstacles, home to unlimited egos who know no limitations and who, together with other immoral villains, use organized violence to suppress emancipation of any kind.

In the same way, old Moses struggles with the Egyptian king for the freedom of his people. The mighty Pharaoh plays an insolent and devious game with the hopes of the enslaved Jews, and only the terrible plagues Jahveh sends to the country by the Nile bring them freedom and their exodus through the sea. The Second Book of Moses features the remarkable Verse 5 of Chapter 23, advising us to help our enemy. This demand for united action and the willingness to make sacrifices, which returns later explicitly in the Sermon on the Mount, can also be found in the Book of Tobit, 4:7–9, which says, “Give alms from your possessions... / Give alms in proportion to what you own. If you have great wealth, give alms out of your abundance...” These are fundamental principles of our civilization.

And in Hannah’s song in the First Book of Samuel, in the 2nd Chapter, we find what is almost a commentary on the result of Moses’s deeds: “The bows of the mighty men are broken, and they that stumbled are girded with strength.” And thus, the waves of the sea close upon the Egyptian soldiers.

The old book, after all, is filled with advice and orders of this kind. And the fundamental views are free of tendencies of all hues and know-it-all dogmatism, on the contrary, they are the ones without which we would be lost and out of joint. Both in small individual lives and in the fate of entire people, they are a necessity of civilization. But how hard we find it to stick to them and to stand up for them. There are no victories without corpses, how often did the revolution eat its own children, how often did the hope for peaceful times and brilliant utopias turn into darkest terror! “We have won,” Heine wrote from the Paris uprisings, “but all around lie the bodies of our friends.” Does death have any future value at all? Who could make up for the sacrifice? So what to throw into the balance?

In Handel’s opera-like oratorio, Theodora takes a decisive route: she and her friend Didymus cannot and will not forswear their faith, they remain steadfast – despite massive pressure – and die as martyrs, just like the admirable Dietrich Bonhoeffer centuries later, hanged by Nazi henchmen. Theodora and Bonhoeffer are mere examples from a long list of victims who died for their faith, their convictions.

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The Bacchae are also a wondrous example for our topic. “Euripides lays his finger into the wound that rent our breast, dividing it into two souls,” Michael Köhlmeier writes in this magazine: “That is how it all began.” And: “Whatever you do, whatever you suffer, there was one before you who acted similarly, suffered similarly.” This kind of hero and their stories are a good tradition. Exemplary action is the title.

Shostakovich’s symphonies – especially the second movement of the Tenth shows the “terrible face of Stalin”. The Eleventh Symphony even turns all its polemic force against the “butchers of humanity”. All his life, the composer suffered from this dilemma: the ubiquitous enforced harshness of the Bolsheviks with their Stalinist and criminal bent is opposed to the ego’s inborn need for freedom. But how many artists almost despaired in the face of this frightening contradiction? Brecht is one example, just like Strauss or Gottfried Benn. Dallapiccola was another who spent his life struggling against Italian fascism and Mussolini’s racial laws: the Canti di prigionia are a touching example, reminiscent of Xenakis’s struggles against the reactionary regime of the Colonels in Greece, the cradle of our democratic traditions: what barbaric relapse in the 20th century is to be recalled in this context.

Luigi Nono’s opera *Al gran sole carico d’amore* also tells of the victims of political changes. This major Italian and Venetian composer spent his entire life studying the great dichotomy between individuals and power – and the great failure. This opera provides an unusual answer to our question whether all changes are not rooted in radical subjects. Is this unique opera not also a continuation of the fathers of modernism? Don’t we hear the interludes of Berg’s *Wozzeck* in the constantly recurring *riflessioni*? “The musical means are used to capture a person’s individual and collective statements,” Nono writes. A masterwork! Nono opens his book to various pages in the history of repression. It begins with the history of the Paris Commune and its heroine, Louise Michel. Brecht wrote a famous play about this revolt, a revolt squashed by German Imperial grenades.

Nono goes down an unusual path here, the dramaturgy of this opera being seminally different from many operas we had known previously. The protagonists are those who live in dark shadow, in the shadow of the great sun, who then open a window in history and step into it, to use Joan’s words. Or Louise Michel’s words about the Paris revolt – Michel a martyr like Theodora. Or Tania Bunke, who drowned forty years ago in a Cuban river while marching forward. “The Mother” from Gorky’s grandiose novel and her pugnacious son appear here, just like the mothers of Turin many years later, Vietnamese women, Sicilian emigrants.

Texts by Arthur Rimbaud, Victor Hugo, Bertolt Brecht, Cesare Pavese, Maxim Gorky and others are incorruptible witnesses of these confused revolutionary times, a kaleidoscope of the faded dawns of past centuries.

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And what is the game the wise and powerful Alfonso, the old filosofo, plays with the young people at the beginning of their adult life? Which traps does he set for them, this vain know-it-all who leaves deeply unhappy and destroyed lovers in his wake at the end. What an evil game does Master Almaviva plan in Figaro! How he abuses his power. Only the wise women save him and Figaro from the worst. Corriam tutti!

Why so serious this year in beautiful summery Salzburg, some of you may ask. When we conceived this program, we certainly had no idea about the radical shifts in the global financial markets which threw many people into misery – we did not know about these catastrophes, about the renaissance of state intervention. And thus, it makes sense to stop and consider old terms – shall we say: old values? After all, perhaps we have lost them, or what Camus meant when he spoke of “lived-out moral”!

Let us turn the pages back, then, in search of lost times and utopias – don’t worry, we will surely find them again, and the air of the love of mankind. Come and visit us again in beautiful Salzburg, watch and listen – discussions always included! We look forward to welcoming you, your applause and your criticism!

Yours,
Jürgen Flimm
Artistic Director of the Salzburg Festival