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Mozart Is the Big Draw, but Variety Is the Goal

By GEORGE LOOMIS

SALZBURG — As musical institutions search to do something novel in tribute to Verdi and Wagner, both of whom have their 200th birthdays this year, they may want to remember that Salzburg perennially faces a similar problem. Here, every year is a Mozart year, at least around the time of his birthday on Jan. 27, when Mozartwoche holds forth.

The festival's name, Mozart Week, is actually misleading, since the event lasts 11 days and offers much besides Mozart. Mozart's contemporaries are notably represented, as is new music — Johannes Maria Staud is the composer-in-residence — plus much in-between. Orchestras range from the Vienna Philharmonic to the Mozart Kinderorchester, an ensemble of musicians ranging in ages from 7 to 12, and a flurry of big-name soloists participate. The event, which is independent of the main Salzburg Festival but uses the same venues, has a new artistic director in Marc Minkowski, a conductor known for his persuasive ways with early music and, increasingly, other repertoire.

Mozart, Verdi and Wagner actually made it easy for those wanting to do something different, since each composed operas that are now rarely performed, Mozart more than the others. His were written when he was in his teens (or even earlier), so you can't expect the sophistication of "Così Fan Tutte." Still, we're talking about Mozart, and for quality, "Lucio Silla," composed when Mozart was 16 for a performance in Milan, holds its own with just about any opera seria of the day. By giving it as its single staged production, Mozartwoche meets expectations for novelty and achieves a solid, if qualified success.

As with Mozart's last opera, "La Clemenza di Tito," which also has characters drawn from Roman history, the libretto for "Lucio Silla" by Giovanni de Gamerra culminates in an act of royal clemency. It's not a terribly convincing way to end a drama, especially when the ruler in question, the emperor Lucio Silla, had theretofore been depicted as a thorough-going tyrant. Still, there are many redeeming points, above all Mozart's involving treatment of the love between Giunia, the daughter of a deceased emperor who was an enemy of Silla, and Cecilio, a senator whom Silla exiled to win Giunia for himself.

Arias in “Lucio Silla” are extremely long, but, as demonstrated here, they can work when imaginatively sung by first-rate singers thoughtfully directed. Both Acts 1 and 2, of the three-act opera, conclude with scenes that break the flow of arias arrestingly — the first with a Gluck-like scene set in a mausoleum for emperors and the second with a dramatic trio sung in the senate. Their effect is blunted because the production takes a single intermission midway through Act 2, something that could be remedied when the three-and-a-half-hour production returns in July during the Salzburg Festival, of which it is a co-production.

Speaking of clemency, the production, in the Haus für Mozart, adds a new wrinkle to Silla’s transformation by including an aria by Johann Christian Bach from his setting three years later of de Gamerra’s libretto, which Mozart omitted. A fine piece with obbligato winds by a composer Mozart revered, it smoothes Silla’s change of heart by allowing him to ruminate on his virtue. In this performance, Silla humbles himself by singing it from the orchestra pit as a co-equal of the solo wind players.

It’s a touching detail of Marshall Pynkowski’s elegant production, which offers an 18th-century take on ancient Rome while allowing room for idiosyncratic departures. One departure is a generous amount of ballet, which is impeccably executed but sometimes ill-matched to music not conceived for dance. Antoine Fontaine’s sets and costumes, which replicate in detail Roman architecture, gardens and ruins, and dress the women in elaborate ball gowns, are stunning.

Les Musiciens du Louvre Grenoble play expertly under Mr. Minkowski’s stylish leadership, and the cast’s four women (two in trouser roles) are outstanding. Olga Peretyatko sings dazzlingly in the phenomenal role of Giunia, and the emerging, pure-toned mezzo, Marianne Crebassa, is splendidly charismatic as Cecilio. Eva Liebau is fetching in the lighter-veined arias Mozart gave Celia, Silla’s sister, and Inga Kalna sings fervently as Cecilio’s ally, Lucio Cinna.

Silla is Rolando Villazón, who has surmounted vocal problems but can’t seem to accept that his less than voluminous tenor voice will never qualify him for the heartthrob roles he once seemed destined for. If he wants to sing Mozart, he must give up his macho ways, which almost comically exaggerate Silla’s volatility, and cultivate elegance. He adds a long, ungainly cadenza to the J.C. Bach aria that Mr. Minkowski, who surely knows better, should have vetoed.

It was enough to make one long for the purity of chamber music, and fortunately that longing could be satisfied the morning after the “Silla” premiere when Menahem Pressler, for decades the expert pianist of the Beaux Arts Trio, joined forces with the redoubtable Emerson Quartet in an all-Mozart program in the Mozarteum, which

included both the composer's piano quartets. It was apparently the first time the 89-year-old pianist collaborated with the Emerson, which lent the occasion a special aura, especially since the cellist David Finckel will depart the group later this year: You knew it was an event that could not often be repeated.

Mr. Pressler's poised and reflective playing was handsomely complemented by fluent, richly textured sonorities from the strings. Although the stormy passions of the G-minor quartet, K. 478, were not shortchanged, under the circumstances the sublime E-flat quartet, K. 493, proved especially entrancing. On their own the Emerson played the irresistible Hoffmeister Quartet, K. 499, and the Adagio and Fugue in C minor, K. 546, an homage by Mozart to the Baroque style.

That evening in the Grosses Festspielhaus, Simon Rattle led the Orchestra of the Age of Enlightenment in the last three symphonies of Mozart. The Mozartwoche prides itself on embracing a range of stylistic choices in performances of music by its favorite son, but this period-instrument performance got things just about right.

Salzburg regulars will recall the heavy-going experience Nikolaus Harnoncourt made of these works with the Vienna Philharmonic at the main festival a few years ago. Mr. Rattle's performances had in ample supply what was missing then — spontaneity — and he took a less doctrinaire approach to repeats (although all first-movement exposition repeats were observed). Drawing warm playing from the orchestra, he reminded us that in addition to their many other attributes, these symphonies have considerable charm.

Mozartwoche. Salzburg. *Through Feb. 3.*