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INTERVIEW of composer Nikolaus Schapfl, April 2019

*1) Nikolaus, in your website welcome page, you mention that the development of music and theater is indicative of where humanity is headed: either towards progression or regression. So let us jump right into it - based on the state of classical music today, where do you think humanity is headed?*

The development of the theater and music, and art generally, depends for me on the extent to which freedom is achieved and an artist can have recourse to society, to the public, without being boxed in by the norms of the media or opinion-makers in order to be heard at all. This freedom of the artist, of course, cannot be dogmatic. In the case of music, it is always situated in the context of musical circles – that is to say, the musicians who play the music, the singers who play the roles, the directors, the set designers, and so on, and the audience.

It is then up to the performers and audiences to, in effect, agree on what is good and what's worthy of being listened to again. Often, time plays an important role in arriving at such a judgement. Good art builds man up, it assures him of a deeper meaning to his existence, which he notices with astonishment and emotion. In my view, a creative work always shows how great life is and not which boundaries of obscenity are still to be crossed. Unfortunately, in the 1990s there were extreme, scandalous excesses on the stages of Europe and little by way of recognizable artistic value. The content of these excesses I will not bother to call to the attention of the reader of these lines. Every year since around 1990 I thought that this trend had run its course, that things could not continue like this. But no. The next year saw an even more egregious crossing of the boundary in the staging of classical operas. I will just present in summary fashion an example in the form a Teichoscopy from inside a concert hall. A performer on the stage of what describes itself as Europe's most important music festival was doing something that had no artistic merit or edifying value and for which he would have been arrested had he done it in the street. A prominent civic leader of this city turned around and said to an equally prominent person: "I am so ashamed of my city that such a thing can be shown here and no one makes a fuss about it." A director, who for decades was the artistic director of an opera house, and who, by the way, publicly praised my opera *The Little Prince*, told me at the premier of his production of *Don Giovanni*, (although I had never discussed this topic with him) that he wanted, in effect, to apologize for his production: "If a director does not do something obscene, he'll be torn apart by the critics." The reader of this piece should not make the typical mistake of our postfactual era and think "That's so wrong." First of all, it's a matter of which criteria guide artists when carrying out their work; secondly, how likely is it that artists will not be influenced by the dominant forces in the culture?

I come back to my initial point: It is a question of freedom. A certain part of the cultural establishment will dictate to everyone else what good art is. No contrary views are allowed. Freedom then exists only in choosing between full submission or barring participation in the social discourse as, for example, in denying career opportunities to singers and actors who will not go along with smutty content. I know of numerous complaints from opera singers about this. I could regale you with stories of what this or that famous singer had to do but will refrain from doing so.

The second aspect of the regression I see is that the same pieces of core repertory are constantly presented – a selection of around 15 operas worldwide. These are then staged anew, often in an entirely new context. In most cases, no deeper statement gets made, no deeper relevance to our

time is achieved; rather, the piece is distorted and stripped of its unique artistic voice. Very often the vacuum of meaning -- for want of good ideas -- is filled by obscenities, leaving one speechless. I ask myself why these directors, if they are so wonderfully creative, do not come up with their own librettos rather than distort the masterpiece of someone else who cannot defend himself? I find this cheap, cowardly and highly uncreative. Concerning something positive to report, then, happily, there has been and there is some good news: For example, the staging of *La Traviata* in 2005 in Salzburg by Willi Decker with sets by Wolfgang Gussmann, which was Anna Netrebko's breakthrough performance: some, in my view, backward members of the audience criticized the production and rejected it on the grounds it was far too modern. Which is correct: Willi Decker transported this opera visually into our time -- elegant, beautiful, tasteful, and most important: he told the story as Verdi and Piave meant it to be told. It was a marvelous evening, and during intermission, ladies descended the grand staircase leading to the entrance hall, their faces smeared with running mascara. With this production one understood what opera can mean -- a great social experience, a heart-rending drama, which makes palpable the value of life, not just the furtive whispering behind one's hand of things better left unsaid.

*2) How would you describe your composition style?*

I write tonal music, which means, triads, keys and melodies. Atonality is for me a means of expression but would be too little if that's all there were. By the same token, a limited, minimal tonality would be, for me, too little. I respect other opinions because this is part of freedom. Freedom is not a matter of telling others how they have to compose, or of telling young composers they will only be admitted to the conservatory or allowed to perform publicly if they submit. In any case, can allowing oneself to be dictated to where style is concerned lead to anything other than the death of music? I remember all too well the attacks of the self-proclaimed guardians of style reinforced by the regrettable knuckling-under of music students, which manifested itself in, among other things, whispered statements to the effect that it's just a matter of avoiding the triad. Recently, in February 2019, I met a composer who, in the 1990s, was a docent in the same conservatory where I was studying composing. He said to me that was really like a dictatorship. I smiled and thought the "was" could be replaced with an "is."

I could offer lots of evidence to show how higher schools of art and music exert pressure to conform. The important thing, however, is to convince audience and musicians with music. Then I was hearing: "Your opera will never be performed." They meant because it consisted mainly of tonal music. Just a few years later for at least five years, if not longer, it was the most frequently performed opera by a living composer in central Europe. That proves that not only prescribed ideologies but public opinion, the desire of musicians to play quality music and the expectation of ticket sales on the part of empresarios also play a role.

*3) Do you consider yourself a retrograde composer? Or modern?*

I consider myself an artist who is attracted to timeless means of expression and content. I do not shy away from making waves. By "timeless" I do not mean meaningless clichés, but rather enthusiasm for and through edifying sound-experiences, new and newly discovered, positive, perspective-opening horizons, the experience of deep truth, of a yes to love, life and people and not bleak, nerve-wracking torrents of noise, pounding, raucous roaring devitalizing every sense, a profoundly tedious prison-existence devoid of hope and light.

I well remember when I started composing in the 1970s, I experienced something that for me was incomprehensible: The aggressiveness of some in the music world, including professors of music, toward young composers who wanted to delve into music and the forces, laws and possibilities at work in it. The pressure to conform, that is to say, the compulsion to accept and promote atonality was brutal. I consider this hundred-year-old avant garde that acts as a monolithic dictatorship and has not changed its essence in one hundred years, highly retrograde. Progress can only be made when ways are found to inspire people, make beauty tangible and with it the meaning of human life. I think of the 5 Pieces of Dmitriy Shostakovich, pieces which are tonal and are performed everywhere on the most diverse occasions because they move people and awaken in them the desire to hear them again. I think of the many “aesthetically correct” constructs in the form of musical notes that no one wants to listen to a second time unless for reasons of political correctness.

*4) You have written an opera "The Little Prince" that is based on a famous novel by Antoine de Saint-Exupéry. What is your opinion on his philosophy: "You become responsible, forever, for what you have tamed." Would you agree with it?*

Of course, we are all sheep and shepherds. There are people to whom we owe respect for their counsel, and whom wisdom alone tells us to follow. And yet, we cannot pass someone by who needs our help. According to the Gospel, the Last Judgement specifies only sins of omission. I understand “tamed” to mean that there is a hierarchy of love – the people closest to us must be the first objects of our devotion. But in principle, it applies to everyone.

*5) You have written two operas. This is rare in contemporary classical music. There are very few composers who write in the opera genre. Why do you think that is?*

I do not know. I can only imagine. Perhaps it is because one must overcome a larger number of obstacles before an opera is actually performed. Instrumental works require less effort, there are no sets, and no need to acquire rights, etc. Besides, if pure music, depending on the dimensions and context of the work, has not only social but political significance, how much more does opera have vast political resonance? Many media representatives and politicians want to avoid a situation whereby people overstep the boundaries of supervised thought.

*6) Do you publish your works independently or do you use a certain publisher?*

I have published works with four publishing houses and also with my own firm Mirabell-Music-Publishing. The role of music publishers has changed in the sense that no one needs anyone to publish sheet music anymore because composers today can at least produce final drafts including the orchestral voices on the computer without much additional expense. Publishing houses, of course, remain indispensable where the large-scale sale of sheet music is concerned. Even theatrical publishers for opera provide very valuable services for a beginner in terms of stage contracts.

*7) You have written for almost every category of classical music - chamber, lieder, orchestra, opera, film, even electronic. What is your favorite ensemble or instrument to write for? Does one particular ensemble have a special place in your heart?*

I very much love the human voice, especially the setting of texts to music as I am very attracted to lyrics. I am also fascinated by mixed choirs. I have always found it remarkable that female and

male voices cover all of the relevant and necessary ambitus, the range from high to low inside of which the music lives and can only take place. Quite a happenstance. I think of the phenomenon, if I am allowed the comparison, that water density does not continuously increase when the temperature drops but reaches its highest point at +4°C (+39.2° Fahrenheit) and then sinks again, which is why fish can survive in a lake during the winter. Again, quite a happenstance.

Otherwise, I love all kinds of music, including heavy metal, if only some of the lyrics were not so off-putting. I find the violin as well as all string instruments to be, like song, simply thrilling, but every single instrument from the didgeridoo, to the flute, to the oboe, to the clarinet, to the bassoon and the brass instruments is an enriching universe in itself. Each instrument has its own personality. Take the horn with its wonderful sound full of overtones that arouses in me visions of the mountains, a freedom over things that no one can take away from me, or the trumpets – their luster, their radiant power and virtuosity. As a composer, one must know precisely what kind of instrument in any given sound range is the best one to use, and/or what statement will be made thereby.

*8) What or who is your main inspiration?*

Events that touch the soul. Beethoven once wrote: “The most beautiful themes slip into my heart from a pair of eyes.” I must say I fully understand this statement. The complete palette of feelings and experiences are conserved in music – inspiration, happiness, frustration, sadness. Music always echoes.

*9) Do you compose your works in a fast manner, or does it take you a while before completing a piece?*

Both. I can start and finish a work, say, a movement for a chamber piece or an aria for an opera, in an afternoon. Or it can take me months of wracking my brains to arrive at a final product. The more themes that are juxtaposed in a work, the more time it takes, as a rule, to bring the work to maturity. Brahms said he had to go all out on an idea from the first moment; coming to grips with it later would mean a loss of quality. I find that an interesting statement. Beethoven for the most part worked differently. He would take years to polish his work.

*10) When you write for instrumentalists or vocalists what measures do you take to write for their particular instrument?*

As a rule, I am independent of instrumentalists when it comes to forming my compositional idea. The possibilities of instruments I know fairly well. I am aware when I write for the organ that I am no organist, and of the attentiveness that is required in questions of articulation, the pedal, the positioning of octaves in reference to the various manuals, etc. In writing for piano, pianists as a rule notice I am myself a pianist. Where violins are concerned, I had the good fortune that Vladimir Tsy-pin, principal violinist at the New York Philharmonic, worked on some of my compositions. He showed me a great deal and I significantly improved my ability to write for violin, including the string parts for orchestra. One must be careful with the harp because this instrument requires specialized knowledge and if one doesn't have it one can make oneself very unpopular. Happily, the harpist who performed in the premier of my first opera took me aside and we spent a whole day revising the harp part. And yet I forgot this specialized knowledge when I composed a piece for

orchestra ten years later, which was reflected in the piercing gaze of the harpist. If looks could kill! Making an effort to learn in advance is a good investment.

While studying at the Mozarteum, I learned a lot about vocal technique – breathing, *passaggio*, i.e., the transition between vocal registers and vocal treatment depending on height, etc.

*11) As a pianist, have you ever wanted to compose a piece for prepared piano?*

I have never had anything against it. But it would only become urgent for me after I had written all of the music for the unprepared piano.

*12) Is it possible to create an education model to teach one how to be a GOOD composer? Or is a good composer simply born?*

That brings to mind some good jokes about Brahms. A young man shows him his compositions and, after a while, asks: “So, master, am I a composer?” “Young man, tell me, where did you get this fantastic note paper?” Far more enlightening is the answer he gave to the same question posed by someone else: “Your question already shows that you are not.”

For me, this is an important discovery: what fascinates me, also fascinates others. That means, therefore, aesthetics is not a matter of subjective opinion, but of shared experiences of beauty, being moved by it, and so on. Good music has to do with a certain *je ne sais quoi*, a certain something, that can be hidden behind simple notes, and to experience whatever it evokes, to write it down, and, if possible, with much effort, to give it greater impact. It is clear there is no simple recipe. “How does one compose music?” There is no simple answer. Just this: without a great deal of learning and knowledge it is hard to achieve good compositions in the all-encompassing sense. Certainly, a natural talent can write a poignant melody or a brilliant song, and thereby a work of music that towers above the entire output of graduates of conservatories around the world, yet the fact that almost without exception the greatest composers were self-taught, that is to say, felt the need to know more and more about music and to penetrate deeper into its mystery and its laws, proves that there is a lot to know, and to reflect on and a lot to learn. This knowledge would be useless, of course, if that elusive thing called talent were not present.

In this regard, I think of the statement of Franz Lachner, a composer and friend of Franz Schubert, which is unbelievable for us today: “It’s a pity that Schubert did not learn as much as I did, otherwise, with his extraordinary talent, he would have become a master.” That shows that knowledge alone can be overestimated. Lachner’s works are, in my opinion at least, good, but the special talent whose source is intangible and undefinable, and the valuable, basic material, which he alone can identify, open up unimagined horizons and create first of all the basis for an epoch-making work.

*13) You teach composition at the University of Redlands in Salzburg. What is the most important thing you want your students to take away from their studies with you?*

What fascinates me, also fascinates others. The important thing is not to conform, not to redundantly ape existing works making small changes, but rather to trust in the objectivity of one’s own perceptions. This entails a mature approach to one’s own spontaneity. Good ideas cannot be forced, but when they happen, I must recognize and develop them in the context of the people

around me. Composing is to a great degree a culture of taste – knowing what to reject and what to put to good use. Better to take the first-rate, the diamonds, than the second-rate, the glittering but worthless quartz, and so it's better to continue prospecting until I have found a better subject or musical theme, a better solution.

*14) Nowadays, how difficult is it to find performers to premier a new work? Describe the process of how you produce your newly written work (marketing, musicians, rehearsals). Or do you not worry about it, i.e. you consider your job done when you have made a manuscript?*

Of course, and that was the professors at the conservatory always urged us to do – a composer must actively strive to have his works performed. Entrepreneurship is in demand. The marketing of music has, of course, its own peculiar aspects. Usually, I compose according to a contract or commission, and I am trying to have the pieces performed. The further exploitation can require one to dig in one's heels and be persistent. I am far from having found a solution to this state of affairs. I usually spend my time composing and have little free time for marketing. It is easy to find musicians. They must receive a good honorarium. And I must ask for an appropriate price for myself. "Pay-to-play" I have never done.

Regarding uncontracted works – for example, my two operas – I was the contractor. I invested time, sought advice, then came performances, and eventually income. A good friend, a composer, successful publisher and professor, once said to me. "You have had good luck." Even so, I have often thought there's a long way to go before reaching the top.

*15) Several of your works are commissioned. Do you feel a lot of pressure when writing a piece for someone who has requested your collaboration?*

So far, I have been able to handle the pressure. Of course, there is the matter of whether or not, interiorly, you are on the same wavelength as the producer. When there is little time, it is like a declaration of war – little sleep, the support of my wife. It is indeed astonishing how one's effectiveness increases when one is able to completely reduce things to the essential.

*translation: Anthony Salvia, NY*