

A New Regime in Lockenhaus

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ISTANBUL – Here's an interesting way to kick off a chamber music festival in the idyllic Austrian countryside where Mozart is still king: program the music of John Cage. That's how young German cellist Nicolas Altstaedt, a member of the Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center and two-time BBC New Generation Artist, launched his regime as director of the Lockenhaus Chamber Music Festival, July 5-11.

In fact he was not staging a palace coup; rather, this renowned summer series was founded by violinist Gidon Kremer in 1981 for the purpose of exploring new music. Audiences have been trained to expect the unexpected, and Altstaedt was eager to deliver, filling his inaugural season with a dizzying schedule of 15 innovative programs across seven days.

Once past Cage's *Living Room Music*, as the first concert's opener, came a marathon mix of Xenakis, Mozart, Fazil Say, Britten, Piazzolla, J.S. Bach, Debussy, Schubert, Crumb, and a special spotlight on Hungarians Bartók, Von Dohnányi, Kurtág, Veress, Kodály, and Ligeti. The cast of 30 international musicians included violinists Ivry Gitlis (90 years old and still concertizing), Erik Schumann, Priya Mitchell, Vilde Frang, Pekka Kuusisto, Nicolas Dautricourt; and pianists Alexander Lonquich, Cristina Barbuti, Katia Skanavi, Daniil Trifonov, and José Gallardo. The Hungarian spotlight was further brightened by performances from the Kelemen String Quartet (Barnabás Kelemen, Katalin Kokas, Gábor Homoki, and Dóra Kokas) from Budapest, along with members of the Hungarian National Ballet.

Altstaedt selected *Metamorphosis* as the festival theme. "To me, metamorphosis is the exciting dimension of freedom through transformation," Altstaedt told me in a brief interview, referring to not only the liberty to choose from so many centuries of repertoire, but to re-interpret what has already existed in a new way -- by juxtaposition. "It's critical, in my opinion, to feel this expansion through radical exposure to everything that's out there."

By that, he means pairing Haydn with Ligeti, Schumann with Wolfgang Rihm, and Bach with electronica. The newest piece, Turkish composer Fazil Say's *Sonata for Piano and Violoncello*, Op. 41 (2012), was written for Altstaedt, commissioned by the BBC, and premiered in London in June. Drawing upon the idioms of Anatolian folk instruments and melodies, the *Sonata* is a distinctive new addition to the repertoire, here performed by Altstaedt and pianist Gallardo.

Altstaedt also used the metamorphosis theme in choice of titles: Britten's *Six Metamorphoses after Ovid*, with oboist Maurice Bourgue; Lutoslawski's *Grave – Metamorphosen*, by cellist Sebastian Klinger and Gallardo; and an especially vibrant performance of Ligeti's *First String Quartet*, *Métamorphoses nocturnes*, by the Kelemen Quartet and the Hungarian National Ballet. The final concert featured a glow performance of Strauss' late masterpiece *Metamorphosen*.

Kremer's influence remains, strengthened by his performances on the final two days that put Altstaedt stood respectfully in the wings. Altstaedt has also retained his predecessor's informal style. The concerts were often performed in T-shirts and sandals, the musicians talked freely to the

audience, and in several instances they improvised while waiting for colleagues who were unavoidably late. The only concession to formality was seating the President of Austria, Heinz Fischer, in the front row of the audience on opening night, but even that was finessed without pomp or circumstance.

Another Kremer legacy is "carte blanche," where a renowned artist can drop in as a surprise guest, with surprise repertoire. Kremer was one of them, so was Gittlis, whose concertizing focused on paying homage to Fritz Kreisler with loving renditions of his romantic style, accompanied by impromptu kibitzing from the stage.

If Altstaedt is able to realize his dreams, he will not only move Lockenhaus further into the future, via electronic music, but also into the past -- before Mozart. "Our main venues are a medieval castle and a Baroque church," he explains. "What perfect places to stage Baroque operas, and maybe with original instruments. I'm one hundred percent behind both Baroque *and* contemporary improvisation. Pekka [Kuusisto] was so thrilled to be able to do Bach [the unaccompanied violin suites] with electronics. You can't do that kind of thing anywhere else."

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