

TODAY'S ZAMAN

Lockenhaus Chamber Music Festival: New director debuts

Nestled in the green hills of Burgenland, the easternmost province of Austria that shares a border with Hungary, is Lockenhaus.

It's both a village and a castle. Every summer, for the past 30 years, a chamber music festival takes place in the 13th-century Lockenhaus castle, as well as in the village's ornate Baroque-era cathedral and a local school. Celebrated violinist Gidon Kremer (recipient of the Istanbul Foundation for Culture and Art's Lifetime Achievement Award in 2011) founded the festival in 1981 and has passed the torch to young German cellist Nicolas Altstaedt as artistic director.

From the start of his debut, Altstaedt hasn't strayed far from Kremer's philosophy of "music-making with friends for friends," and the important proviso "far away from the commercial world of music" is still very much intact. The only concession to formality was seating the president of Austria, Heinz Fischer, in the front row of the audience, but without any pomp and circumstance.

Altstaedt's theme for his first season here is "Metamorphosis," which is reflected in the creative programming of the 18 concerts he planned for the 7-day festival -- and some days had three concerts. "Metamorphosis to me is the exciting dimension of freedom through transformation," he said, referring to not only the liberty to choose from so many centuries-worth of repertoire, but to re-interpret what has already existed in a new way -- by juxtaposition.

So, to kick off the transformation, the first piece on opening night, July 5, was avant-garde American composer John Cage's "Living Room Music," in which four people sit at a table and read the newspaper while performing improvisatory percussive activities with random objects. This was, in Altstaedt's words, "a real statement. The living room is symbolic of the fact that music is like our living room. It's such an existential piece. It's Cage's 100th birthday this year, and you can play absolutely anything after it."

And what followed, over the next three days, were spectacular performances of music by Iannis Xenakis, W.A. Mozart, Fazıl Say, Benjamin Britten, Astor Piazzolla, J.S. Bach, Claude Debussy, Franz Schubert, George Crumb and special concerts of the music of Hungarian composers Béla Bartók, Ernst von Dohnányi, György Kurtág, Sándor Veress, Zoltán Kodály and György Ligeti.

Altstaedt chose 30 international musicians whose energy and artistic excellence are on a par with Kremer's crew of stellar classical and contemporary interpreters. Some of the key musicians are violinists Ivry Gitlis (now 90 years old, and still concertizing), Erik Schumann, Priya Mitchell, Vilde Frang, Pekka Kuusisto and Nicolas Dautricourt and pianists Alexander Lonquich, Cristina Barbuti, Katia Skanavi and José Gallardo. The consort of Hungarian artists includes the Kelemen Quartet from Budapest and members of the Hungarian National Ballet.

Say, Hungarian composers take spotlight

Several performances were especially outstanding illuminations of scores that are seldom played or, in the case of Fazıl Say's new "Sonata for Piano and Violoncello, Opus 41," are premieres. Written specifically for Altstaedt and commissioned by the BBC in London, this piece is a jewel of assimilation of Turkish regional influences, jazz and Say's own daredevil style. Divided into four sections, "Sivas," "Hopa," "Ankara" and "Bodrum," Say drew his inspiration from the folk song "Sazım," the kemençe (Black Sea lap fiddle), "hüzün" (sorrow) and swing. The performance by Altstaedt and pianist Gallardo was an electrifying experience. Aside from the visceral thrills, Say's clever use of the cello to imitate the kemençe, a "walking bass" jazz line and haunting little morsels of melody (including quotes from his piano piece "Kara Toprak") expressed a powerful mix of intensity and nonchalance but, above all, was a multi-hued masterpiece for the cello and piano repertoire. The Hungarian-themed weekend on July 7 and 8 included Dohnányi's "Piano Quintet No. 2"; Ligeti's "Bagatelles for Wind Quintet," String Quartet No. 1 "Metamorphosis Nocturnes" and "Old Hungarian Ballroom Dances"; Kurtág's "Hommage à Robert Schumann"; Veress' "Sonatine for Oboe, Clarinet and Bassoon"; Kodály's "Duo for Violin and Cello"; and several selections from Bartók's 44 violin duos. Though all were compelling and varied in style and structure, the Dohnányi quintet won this listener's heart for its lush late-Romantic ecstasy as well as the Ligeti quartet for its devastating drama that served as accompaniment for the Hungarian Ballet's amazingly vigorous performance on a hot and sticky summer night.

In keeping with the festival's theme, Debussy's flute soliloquy "Syrinx" (performed by Janne Thomsen) and Britten's "'Metamorphosis' after Ovid" for oboe (performed by Maurice Bourgue) and reader, a six-part suite that paints mini-portraits of the mythical demigods like Pan, Bacchus and Narcissus, were performed at the morning concert of July 8. Each character undergoes a transformation that has spawned legends and lore for centuries. This and Witold Lutoslawski's 12-tone piece from 1981, "Grave -- Metamorphosen" (Slow Metamorphosis), for cello and piano kept the transformation going in the afternoon concert, along with Wilhelm Killmayer's extraordinary "Fantasie" for violin and piano performed by violinist Mitchell with scintillating, ethereal tone, and pianist Skanavi. This composer's long and sustained supersonically high notes for the violin painted an eerie and timeless vision of eternal

transubstantiation.

The loyal audience here is long used to Kremer's past admixture of old and new, and especially the lack of pretension. "Diverse programming -- I want them all to have a topic and include the wishes of the artists," said Altstaedt. "And sometimes other artists appear as a surprise. This audience is used to surprises because of Gidon -- he's so casual. This is not Carnegie Hall or Chatelet -- it's a medieval castle."

From medieval to modern, the Lockenhaus Festival is now Altstaedt's.

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Muhabir: ALEXANDRA IVANOFF
