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Musical station-theatre

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From the moment the audience enters the semi-darkened halls of the SOHO Studios, there is a sense of embarking on a mediated journey through time. Ruth Cerha's piece presents itself as a "musical station-theatre" ("Stationentheater") spanning five stations, in which two sopranos, two dancers, a pianist and a clarinettist guide us backwards through life, death and the threshold between them.

The formal conceit—travelling in reverse, unpacking a matryoshka-koffer of memory and mortality—is bold and immediately sets up a poetic framework in which the known polarity of sleeping/waking, living/dying, remembering/forgetting is brought into dynamic interplay. Cerha's concept is deeply personal: the piece was prompted by the death of her father, the composer Friedrich Cerha, and thus deals with loss, inheritance and temporality at intimate scale.

The audience is guided through physical stations in space — the choreography of the dancers Fabian Huster and Jana Würleitner, the singers Julitta Dominika Walder and Katrin Targo, the off-speaker Christian Reiner, and the instrumental voices of Hemma Tuppy (piano) and Jake Mann (clarinet) all contribute to an immersive tableau of being and passing. Musically, Die Nacht weiß nicht vom Tage is at once approachable and elusive. Cerha writes eight songs, interspersed with four interludes and an overture, built around text, chant and lightly modernist gestures.

The instrumental writing, led by piano and clarinet, often evokes an introspective mood: passages of sustained lines, occasional bursts of dissonance, a sense that the music skirts the edge between tonal recollection and fragmentary ambiguity. Critics have noted the blend of expressionist leanings and cabaret-influenced vocal writing, mixed with chamber-music sensibility. In one vivid image the piano, mounted on a "ship-like" platform (a "Klavierschiff"), is brought into the performance space—linking thematic metaphor (voyage, passage, threshold) with musical reality. What makes the work compelling is how the theatrical and musical elements intertwine.

The choreographic movement does not simply illustrate the songs, but rather runs alongside them: the dancers haul a large matryoshka-koffer, induct transitions between stations; the two sopranos act more like a Greek chorus, commenting, hovering, sometimes interrupting. The staging invites the audience to move with the performers: rather than staying in one fixed seat, the spectators are asked to traverse the space, follow the procession of sound and movement, and inhabit the liminal zones of the work. This kind of

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immersive routing adds to the material's emotional weight—it is not merely "listening to a piece" but "travelling through life" together with the ensemble.

However, the piece is not without its tensions. While the formal ambition of "reversing life" and "station-theatre of mortality" is clear, some of the transitions feel slightly schematic—open suitcases, symbolic gestures of earth-piles, movements of hauling or pushing may at times lean toward the familiar rather than the entirely new. Moreover, the wide mix of reference-points in the music—the expressionist thrusts, the cabaret echoes, the chamber intimacy—might leave some listeners unsure where to place the work in stylistic terms. Yet arguably that is part of the work's point: to dwell in that "between" space.

Thematically, the piece provides a rich contemplation of mortality. The statement that "the night does not know of the day" becomes a poetic knot: the human condition (in darkness) confronts the daylight of awareness; the cycle of sleep/wake becomes that of living/dying; the unseen becomes the seen. Cerha uses the structure of her piece to map this in five stations, thereby giving form to experiences which are usually un-formed: grief, memory, anticipation, regression. In the afterword in press one reads: "Der Tod als Rückseite des Lebens … ist ein blinder Fleck im menschlichen Bewusstsein."

The decision to move backwards through life gives the evening a strangely inverted solace: death is not the terminus but the vantage from which life is revisited, and perhaps redeemed. From a production point of view, the collaboration between stage design (Manuela Tober), lighting (Veronika Mayerböck), video (Katrin Cebul) and motion (Huster/Würleitner) succeeds in making space fluid. In the somewhat bare architecture of the SOHO Studios the staging appears both intimate and vast: moments of stillness (solo clarinet, contained voice) are followed by full movement and procession. The lighting frequently changes—from warm amber to cooler blues—underscoring shifting tonal registers of living and dying.

The visual metaphor of a ship (or journey) is consistent and effective.
Importantly, the audience's engagement is not passive. The routing, the mobile nature of the staging, the absence of fixed seats (with only limited folding stools) ensure the viewer is part of the journey, not simply observer. This democratization of space—the audience floats, moves, follows—gives a bodily dimension to the abstraction of mortality and memory. It is less "look at death" and more "live alongside it for a while".

In terms of impact, Die Nacht weiß nicht vom Tage achieves a delicate balance: it neither wallows in melancholy nor resorts to facile pep-talk about life. Rather, it offers an unvarnished acknowledgment of finitude, and in that acknowledgment a kind of resonance: the journey backwards reminds us of forward motion; the darkness inflects the light. As one critic wrote: "an evening between ash, dust, but also life-joy." The piece does not promise relief or transcendence, but offers a reflection: the journey ends where it began, and in that loop we glimpse both the fragility and value of our time.

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If I were to offer a small register of caution: the immersive format may challenge those expecting a traditional seated concert or opera; the mobility and shifting stations require attention, and some of the symbolic objects (e.g., the matryoshka-koffer, the open earth pit) tread close to the theatrical rather than purely musical. But these are minor critiques in light of the performance's conviction. The musicianship is solid, the singers sustain a strong presence, the dancers hold the weight of the staging with clarity. The chosen instrumentation (piano + clarinet + voices + movement) feels intimate yet sufficient for the emotional scope. The fact that the text, music and stage conception all come from Cerha reinforces the unified vision.

In conclusion, Die Nacht weiß nicht vom Tage is a meaningful, inventive addition to contemporary music-theatre. It speaks to the conditions of our time—aging, memory, generational loss—without becoming merely topical. It invites reflection, movement, listening and entering the space of life's reversals. For festival-goers at Wien Modern seeking something both immersive and contemplative, this work offers a quietly powerful experience. It is not easy entertainment—but neither is it decorative—it challenges and rewards in equal measure.

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