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Ressort: Kunst, Kultur und Musik

Saint François d'Assise

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Every so often — perhaps once a decade — an opera evening arrives that does not so much end as continue inside you on the walk home, on the following morning, in the weeks after. Olivier Messiaen's Saint François d'Assise has always been one of those works in potential that became fact. This is Salzburg's new production, directed and designed by Romeo Castellucci and conducted by Maxime Pascal.

Saint François d'Assise is the kind of achievement that recalibrates one's sense of what opera in the twenty-first century is still capable of. It is, quite simply, one of the great festival premieres of our time. Return matters here. It was in this very hall in 1992, in Peter Sellars's staging with Esa-Pekka Salonen conducting the Los Angeles Philharmonic, that Saint François first left its Parisian cocoon and revealed itself to the wider world — a legendary evening that, as festival intendants have often noted, reoriented an entire generation of programmers.

To bring this opus magnum back to the Felsenreitschule for the 800th anniversary of Francis's death, and to entrust it to a director-conductor duo three decades younger than Sellars and Salonen were then, was an act of faith. That faith has been repaid in full. Castellucci's decision to design his own sets, costumes and lighting gives the evening the coherence of a single hand and a single mind. He has spoken of the Felsenreitschule's rock face as an image of La Verna, the mountain where Francis received the stigmata, and the whole staging honours that intuition. The stage is bare, elemental, almost geological — stone, dust, light, and slowly changing shafts of colour that seem to breathe with the score.

Following Messiaen's own comparison of the opera to a cycle of Giottoesque frescoes, Castellucci gives us eight tableaux rather than a plot, each one a devotional image held long enough to become inhabited. Yasmine Hugonnet's choreography for the six angels and six brothers is spare and hieratic; nothing is illustrated, and yet everything is present. When at last the phrase "Je t'aime, Olivier, immense artiste" flashes across the back wall in blood-red, it feels less like a director's signature than a whispered thanks from one artist to another.

Musically, the evening is a triumph without qualification. Maxime Pascal — conducting his third Salzburg opera and clearly now at the height of his powers — has worked ten days with the Vienna Philharmonic in advance, and the preparation shows in every bar. The orchestra is deployed in three groups around the auditorium, each with its own Ondes Martenot, and the effect is not mere spatial cleverness but a kind of

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luminous encirclement: the listener is inside the score rather than in front of it. Messiaen's chords glow, his birdsong shimmers, his brass climbs with a controlled ecstasy that never tips into bombast. Pascal understands that this music does not build tension in the Wagnerian sense; it accumulates radiance.

Under his baton, the Vienna Philharmonic sounds transfigured — a great late-Romantic instrument playing an entirely new music with the depth of memory and the freshness of first hearing. Philippe Sly, singing his first Francis, is a revelation. The Canadian bass-baritone, a Salzburg Young Singers Project alumnus, brings to the role exactly what it needs and almost never receives: a voice of grain and warmth, not stentorian but inward, capable of moving from spoken-word intimacy to full cantorial flight without a seam. His "Sermon to the Birds" is the emotional summit of the evening; his stigmata scene, framed by Castellucci as a dry, almost silent transaction between man and rock, is unbearably tender.

Sly has said of the role that Messiaen writes "something very gentle, soft, almost ergonomic for the human voice", and one hears exactly that: a Francis who is not a plaster saint but a man learning, slowly, to love. Around him, a cast without a weak link. Lauranne Oliva's Angel — a soprano of celestial float and pinpoint intonation — inhabits the vihuela scene with an otherworldly poise. Sean Panikkar's Leper is a fierce, wounded miracle: the great tenor cry of healing in the third tableau nearly stopped the performance.

Russell Braun's Frère Léon anchors the community with baritonal gravitas; Léo Vermot-Desroches (Massée) and Aaron-Casey Gould (Élie) bring vivid contrast; and Sir Willard White's Frère Bernard is a benediction in itself — thirty years of Messiaen singing distilled into a few paragraphs of holy time. The Konzertvereinigung Wiener Staatsopernchor, prepared by Jozef Chabron and singing offstage as the voice of Christ, produces a sound of near-liturgical purity.

The most heartening thing about this Saint François is what it says about opera's future. Castellucci — a director sometimes accused of coldness — reveals here an unashamed capacity for wonder. Pascal, working with the world's most storied orchestra, proves that historical prestige and contemporary imagination are not enemies. A cast largely in their thirties and forties commits to Messiaen's extreme demands with the joy of pioneers. And an audience of over 1400, sitting for more than four hours in the Felsenreitschule's stone embrace, gave the evening the kind of ovation that does not measure success but recognises grace.

Messiaen once wrote, "You speak to God through music: He will answer you through music." It is one of those sentences a composer can only write if he has staked his whole life on it, and on this Salzburg evening the Felsenreitschule felt like the room in which that wager was finally, publicly redeemed. The answer came back with startling clarity — not as a thunderclap, not as a Wagnerian revelation from the pit, but as something quieter and more astonishing: a slow, patient rising of colour and light and birdsong through four hours of music, until the boundary between listening and praying, between watching an opera

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and undergoing one, dissolved almost without our noticing.

What Messiaen sent up in the form of chords, modes of limited transposition, transcribed blackcap calls and offstage choral thunder returned, in Pascal's and Castellucci's hands, as an experience so integrated that the score itself seemed to be speaking back to its author across the decades. Composer and performers, saint and audience, stone wall and Ondes Martenot — for a long moment they all appeared to be part of the same sentence, and one had the distinct impression that Messiaen, wherever he now is, had heard the reply he spent a lifetime waiting for.

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