

Serious crisis in opera; just one more of many

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Nobody talks about it or wants to talk about it publicly, but opera is going through a serious crisis from which it does not know how to emerge. Artistic directors hope for better times and that the box office will come back more often. But the truth is that alarm bells are already ringing everywhere.

For example, the Bavarian State Opera, which is committed to more than Giuseppe Verdi, Wolfgang Amadé Mozart or Richard Wagner, has had to postpone the premiere of Toshio Hosokawa's "Matsukaze" for at least a year, due to the change in general conditions and the associated budgetary risk.

Munich Opera's artistic director [Serge Dorny](#) puts it bluntly:

We are in a time of upheaval and have to deal with the resulting consequences that create planning risks and make it difficult to stage theatrical and opera productions.

For other, but not too distant reasons, in Vienna, the renowned director of the State Ballet, [Martin Schlöpfer](#), will remain in his position only until the season 2025/2026 and will not renew his contract. Allegedly because of internal criticism, as well as the dissatisfaction of ballet fans and dance critics.

Not just the pandemic

If it had only been the pandemic, theatres and operas could have coped better with the problems. The closure of cultural institutions was a shock, but they would have coped and recovered. But inflation and the energy price crisis followed. In addition to the uncertainty about the new world order, with the war.

Theatres have considerable additional costs. The public is much more concerned and prefers to stay on the sidelines rather than spend a lot of money. People choose to go to the



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theatre only three times a year and not ten. The public space has an important role to play in reversing the retreat into the private sphere. Moreover, culture is finding fewer and fewer venues with affordable rents.

Opera is a case in point. As prestigious as it is, it attracts mainly older audiences, who cannot always go to its performances, so there is a desire for greater openness, for the temples of opera to become a place to go during the day, for all people of all generations.

One more

This is not the first and will certainly not be the last opera crisis. It has always been in sight, but never more so than now, after the pandemic and in the midst of a war in Europe. Times change, and not only climatically. State cultural funding, often more lavish in recent years, remains at best status quo or even decreases. There are many problems. Too much money has been invested in stupid productions, say those who know the business inside out. Theatres are looking for regular singers who will work for little or no money. The currency is to spend as little as possible.

The problems at the Frankfurt am Main Opera House, which also needs a new building due to modern fire and safety requirements, are also budgetary. For example, the working conditions of the orchestra are simply catastrophic. Culture has been underfunded here for years.

This is what is happening; those in charge, politicians or managers, are not aware of how fragile the situation is, or perhaps they are looking for a complete collapse of the system. Young talents who have self-respect refuse to participate in this structure, but many others without such aptitude, sign for whatever it takes to be on stage. At the same time, the system itself has sold out too much to representatives and artists of a particular country, letting them take too much power in the world of operatic entertainment, and now no one knows how to stop the tsunami; it is not merely "Russophobia", they point out.

Festivals

The summer festivals, in particular, have until now been fairly self-sufficient; in Salzburg, with a budget of 67 million euros, they earn 49 million. But there are always tickets left over, as never before - what a time it was when someone would celebrate getting tickets for the Wagner Festivals in Bayreuth after years of waiting on the waiting list!

This is not only due to the high prices. These summer performances also face a number of problems. Munich, Verona, Aix-en-Provence, Salzburg, Bayreuth, Bregenz, Lucerne, Berlin, Edinburgh... all promise sensations at top prices. The most expensive tickets cost 540 euros in Bayreuth or 450 euros in Salzburg. But - as wealthy customers usually like to do - they mainly offer old wine in new bottles... and hope to sell it. Even if, in view of the fear of war, the unpleasant surprises of climate change, inflation and the economic crisis, customers are not necessarily in the mood for luxury relaxation and distraction. In the end, there are and always will be many unsold tickets.

Everything is more expensive

There are many reasons for this. The financiers wanted the tickets in Bayreuth to be very expensive. Elsewhere, too, no one wants to make a long-term commitment in advance; the public wants to decide more spontaneously and is tempted by other big shows. The pandemic has exacerbated this trend. Travel, accommodation and food have become more expensive (and often unpredictable in the case of flights and trains). While there is always talk of discounted, even cheap, tickets, they are scarce and run out quickly. A trip of this kind can cost a couple more than 2,000 euros. It is obvious that they wonder whether it is really worth it, and in an environment that has lost the glamour of more elegant times.

Fewer and fewer famous artists are able to fill the Grand Palais des Festivals in Salzburg (2179 seats) or Lucerne (1898 seats). With the 6659 seats on the Bregenz Lake stage, it is usually popular opera titles that draw the crowds, such as Giacomo Puccini's *Madama Butterfly* this summer and, hopefully, Carl Maria von Weber's *The Poacher* next year.

Political ill-health

Opera stars honour Salzburg less and less frequently in staged productions. Jonas Kaufmann or Elina Garanca are only heard there or in Verona in concerts or recitals, as is Anna Netrebko; moreover, the Russian is not in good political health at the moment. In Bayreuth this year, tenors in particular cancelled their appearances by the dozen; fortunately, they could be replaced adequately or even better.

In Aix-en-Provence, too, not all the tickets were sold out, but everything went, shall we say... relatively well. Artistic director [Pierre Audi](#) certainly opted for experimentation. Thomas Ostermeier, director of the Schaubühne am Lehniner Platz on Berlin's Kurfürstendamm boulevard, was hired for the first time for the opera, and with the 26-year-old Finn Klaus Mäkelä, he brought on board one of the most sought-after young stage stars on a long-term contract.

Conductor and psychologist [Dmitri Tcherniakov](#) deliberately staged Mozart's *Così fan tutte* in Salzburg with older singers as an experiment in exchange between "best agers" - a tricky thing to do, because it must still sound beautiful. There, for better or worse, it worked. That is another issue. Figures who should have long since retired and retired from active artistic life stand in the way of the careers of talented youngsters who see no prospects.

Wagner

Even Bayreuth, which has only one premiere a year, is making efforts. This year, with the Spaniard [Pablo Heras-Casado](#) and the former baroque contralto [Nathalie Stutzmann](#), there were two exciting conducting debuts, and next year [Semion Bychkov](#), [Daniele Gatti](#) and [Philippe Jordan](#) will return. The absence of [Christian Thielemann](#), who prefers to "put the horns" on Richard Wagner in Salzburg, after the quarrel and consequent feud with his great-granddaughter, can certainly be endured.

The latter, [Katharina Wagner](#), dared to incorporate virtual reality glasses into [Jay Scheib](#)'s production of *Parsifal*. It was a backstage battle that once again demonstrated how many brakemen there are in the administrative construction of Germany's most famous cultural event, which urgently needs to be optimised.

The experiment resulted in a disappointing 330 lenses for almost 2000 visitors. So only a few were able to see the actions apparently taking place in the auditorium or the emoji winks promised by the management. "Buh, buh, buh! Get down!" shouts the audience more and more frequently, as the swan's blood virtually drips from the ceiling of the theatre on the "Green Hill".

Salzburg is in turmoil

While Bayreuth is back to work in Wagner's workshop and Aix is also indulging in oddities such as a queer-activist kindergarten singing on baroque instruments, Salzburg is searching in vain for a similar spirit of departure. There, under the direction of Markus Hinterhäuser, who has held various positions almost continuously for more than 30 years, the company is floundering.

The assumption is that the same names with the same opera titles will do the trick. The conflict over the controversial conductor [Teodor Currentzis](#), still courted by the Russian nomenklatura, is simply kept on the sidelines instead of being discussed creatively.

In recent years it has become clear that nothing will ever be the same again, and the pandemic is not the only culprit. It is a general evolution of public behaviour, fuelled by the crises. People are now more flexible, they don't want to be tied down. They no longer want to know in September what they are going to do on 10 April the following year. Bayreuth and Salzburg, two stagnant institutions, are simply part of this development and will have to say goodbye to the idea that tickets are sold out immediately.

Consequences of the pandemic

But it is not only a part of the audience that is currently lacking, it is also the necessary financial resources. State opera houses have to stretch expensive external productions; a contemporary opera festival may soon only be held every two years. And it is increasingly difficult to find staff, which causes bad moods among the overburdened permanent staff. Theatres face daily absenteeism, technical and artistic.

This is getting on the nerves of everyone involved, and the state opera houses are feeling their limits, in terms of personnel and finances, and for the first time so severely. The costs of wood and steel have doubled in some cases, and the workshops are required to be highly adaptable.

For those who know this art form inside out, it is all about communication. There is a deficit. Staff and management need to communicate more and think about what else can be done. This is a new element. It was not a problem until before the pandemic.

Today when a job vacancy is advertised, hardly anyone applies, or at least very few do. They have gone to other sectors. But you also have to take into account that big cities are very expensive and not everyone can afford to live and work in them, not even the good worldwide reputation of those big opera houses is enough for that. If those in charge had known about the effects of the pandemic, they would surely have planned radically differently. The subject of the crisis is far from being exhausted. More reports will follow in the near future.