CRITIC'S NOTEBOOK

On Smaller Opera Stages, Daring Art Has More Room to Breathe

Unlike most countries, Germany has a network of minor but generously subsidized theaters whose vitality is remarkable, and unmatched.

By Jeffrey Arlo Brown

Jeffrey Arlo Brown spent the season visiting German theaters in Darmstadt, Dessau-Rosslau, Lübeck, Magdeburg, Bielefeld, Hildesheim and Kassel

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Near the end of Judith Weir's opera "Miss Fortune," there is an uncanny duet between the main character, Tina, and her fate. Tina is sung by a soprano, and Fate by a countertenor. Although their music is similar, the difference in their vocal timbres creates an unsettling clash.

At a recent production of "Miss Fortune" that I attended at the Theater für Niedersachsen in Hildesheim, a small city in northern Germany, that scene had a memorable charge. Its strange lyricism was undercut by the humor of Tina telling her destiny to butt out as one might set boundaries with a problematic ex.

It was a great operatic moment, and it played to a sparse audience in a city of just over 100,000 people.

During the past season, Germany's leading opera houses — in Berlin and Munich, in Stuttgart and Hamburg — offered largely familiar though well-rendered pleasures, along with a handful of new works by marquee artists in contemporary music. But, unlike almost any other country in the world, Germany *also* has a large network of smaller professional opera houses that step up, offering modernist masterpieces, overlooked rarities and work from this century. (According to the German Music Information Center, the country has 83 institutions presenting opera and music theater.)

In addition to the Theater für Niedersachsen, I traveled to opera houses in Darmstadt, Dessau-Rosslau, Lübeck, Magdeburg, Bielefeld and Kassel throughout the season. Although the performances were often at a lower technical level than in the country's opera capitals — the orchestral playing less polished, the singing rougher, the stagings and acting more beholden to clichés — they also showed a scene whose vitality remains unmatched, thanks to generous but increasingly precarious government funding.

Germany's smaller opera houses allow up-and-coming artists to hone their craft, giving onstage experience to generations of performers. Sonja Isabel Reuter, who gave an assured interpretation of Tina in "Miss Fortune," is Theater für Niedersachsen's only ensemble soprano. Last season, she sang four completely different vocal roles in the space of a week: Mimi from "La Bohème," two different operetta characters and the solo soprano part in Dvorak's cantata "The Specter's Bride." Her three seasons at the house, she said in a phone interview, "were like a crash course in how to be an opera singer."

Smaller houses also allow audiences to get to know a much larger repertoire than what's usually programmed at leading institutions. This season, I often arrived for an opera at a quiet building on an empty street, unsure where the right entrance was, only to find audiences deeply engaged with unfamiliar, challenging art inside.
Editors' Picks

The opera houses in Darmstadt and Dessau put on shattering interpretations of 20th-century classics. Bernd Alois Zimmermann, a German composer who died by suicide in 1970, is best known for his imposing opera "Die Soldaten." In October, a staging of his rarely performed oratorio "Requiem für einen jungen Dichter" ("Requiem for a Young Poet"), followed by Morton Feldman's ensemble piece "Rothko Chapel," premiered at the Staatstheater Darmstadt. Karsten Wiegand, the house's artistic director, who staged the production, had the idea to combine these diametrically opposed works.

"Requiem für einen jungen Dichter" concerns the responsibilities and the limits of individual people in times of oppression, as well as the cyclical nature of political violence. In the oratorio, Wiegand said in an interview, "people don't learn, societies don't learn. That repeats like a centrifuge."

He added the abstract "Rothko Chapel" to release some of that centrifugal force. "I thought it could be interesting, for a piece that is so much about time," Wiegand said, "to add a piece that is about space."

Despite the oratorio's massive scale, Zimmermann treats spoken text as carefully as the most fragile sound, and listeners only understand exactly the words he wants understood. When Wiegand juxtaposed the music and video footage from recent political upheavals, it felt overly literal. But the conclusion of the evening, in which "Rothko Chapel" was accompanied only by a rectangle of cold white light, found solace in Feldman's exquisite austerity. The performance was an effective pairing of music by two great composers who couldn't be more different.
Image

This year is the 100th anniversary of Berg's "Wozzeck," and to celebrate, the Anhaltisches Theater Dessau, in an eastern city that was a center of the Bauhaus movement, showed an insightful new staging of the opera, directed by Christiane Iven. When Wozzeck (the baritone Kay Stiefermann) submits to disgusting physical examinations, Iven used sickly neon greens and pinks to emphasize the scene's body horror. When Marie cheats on her husband with the Drum Major, the performers pose as if creating a series of snapshots — showing not what they did but how Wozzeck might imagine it. The Anhaltische Philharmonie Dessau, under the conductor Markus L. Frank, rendered the score transparently, allowing Stiefermann to give his Wozzeck a quiet menace from the start. In this production, the character is ground down but already has a seed of evil in him. When he murders Marie, it feels inevitable rather than just plausible.

The performances were carefully prepared: Rehearsals for the March premiere started, luxuriously, in November. "Every musician actually had all the rehearsals and was able to get to know the piece as I could," Frank said in a phone interview. "And we found the time to talk a lot about the contents, the compositional technique, the counterpoint, so that the musicians were able to interpret the piece as if it was chamber music."

In Lübeck and Bielefeld, I saw two overlooked, intriguing rarities from the 20th century. Theater Lübeck put on the secular oratorio “Le Vin Herbé” (“The Magic Potion”) by the Swiss composer Frank Martin, staged by Jennifer Toelstede. A retelling of the Tristan and Iseult tale, scored for 12 voices and an ensemble of strings and piano, the composition works with insistently repeating harmonies that change by a note or two at a time before resolving into spacious medieval cadences. It was a refreshingly historical telling of a story usually associated with Wagner’s maximally Romantic interpretation.

The Bielefeld Opera presented a new staging of Martinu’s “The Greek Passion,” which premiered in 1961. Its subject is the way Christian teachings can harden into orthodoxies. The mezzo-soprano Alexandra Ionis was both sensual and innocent as Katerina, a Mary Magdalene-like figure. Manuel Schmitt’s staging, which linked the piece to refugee crises around the world today, allowed the opera to retain its subversive force. Near the end, Martinu gives villagers who reject a group of desperate refugees a gorgeous chorale. The scene was a cruelly beautiful portrait of hypocrisy.

Houses in Magdeburg and Kassel presented recent works by living composers, both of which were less successful. Gerald Barry’s “Salome,” whose world premiere took place in March at Theater Magdeburg, is an intentionally threadbare, brittle composition that gives few sonic pleasures. It puts so much distance between itself and the story that it mostly evokes detached bemusement. The Magdeburgische Philharmonie sounded patchy in a score that is clearly unflattering to play.

In May, the Staatstheater Kassel introduced a new production of Thomas Adès’s 2004 opera “The Tempest.” Julia Lwowski’s staging turned this mannered piece into a largely digital spectacle. There was so much tenuously relevant video that what was happening onstage hardly seemed to matter. The experience was like trying to concentrate on something complicated while a friend shows you an unending stream of Instagram Reels on their phone. There were excellent vocal performances, especially by the soprano Marie-Dominique Ryckmanns as Ariel, but the onstage action was largely static. Compared with the video, it felt like an afterthought.

Of course, occasional disappointment is an unavoidable consequence of artistic risk. Germany’s smaller opera houses offered plenty of variety and excellence this season. But their greatest contribution may be in giving unproven works, performers and directors the opportunity to show what they are worth. “The smaller houses have a little more breathing room to be courageous,” Reuter said. “And I think that’s very beautiful.”

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