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Ressort: Kunst, Kultur und Musik

Lucio Silla: Mozart at the Felsenreitschule

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At sixteen, Mozart already knew how to write a diva an aria that would make to gasp. What he did not yet know — could not have known — was how to make an opera seria psychologically watertight from the first bar to the last. That contradiction is the drama of Lucio Silla, and it is exactly what this semi-staged Salzburg reading, given at the Felsenreitschule, chose to expose rather than to varnish.

Following the success of her Mitridate last summer, Birgit Kajtna-Wönig returned to the young Mozart with a directorial premise that could be a manifesto for the genre: strip away everything but the characters. Her scene setting uses the Felsenreitschule's arcades as an unadorned Roman frame; a bench, a shaft of light, a discreet gesture toward the "dark dungeons and graveyards" Gamerra loved. Ádám Fischer, at the head of the Mozarteumorchester Salzburg, called opera seria a "hermaphrodite between concert and musical theatre", and his conducting embraced that hybridity — muscular attacks in the overture, but chamber-music transparency in the recitatives, where Rupert Burleigh's hammerklavier acted almost as a sixth character.

The evening's headline came with the late replacement of Sara Blanch by Nina Solodovnikova as Giunia, a Salzburg debut on short notice for the Deutsche Oper Berlin soprano. She met the role's punishing coloratura with a bright, slender tone that darkened remarkably in the great tomb aria "Ah, se il crudel periglio", where sorrow and vengeance seemed to fight for the same breath. "Parto, m'affretto" was fearless — the top D landed cleanly, the divisions clean as glass — yet what lingered was the recitative before it: a young woman making a moral decision aloud, in real time. In a semi-staged performance, that kind of interiority is everything.

Giovanni Sala's Silla is a tenor role that can flatter or expose; he made it flatter. His timbre is Italianate but never merely sunny, and he traced the dictator's arc — brute, would-be seducer, penitent — as a study in a man trying, and failing, and finally succeeding, to overcome his own heart. His "Il desio di vendetta e di morte" bristled with military menace; his final act of clemency, sung quietly and almost inwardly, was the more moving for it. Mozart's motto for the opera — "to conquer one's own heart, what victory can equal that?" — has rarely felt less rhetorical.

Around them, three superb Mozartian voices confirmed why casting matters more than sets. Xenia Puskarz Thomas gave Cecilio a mezzo of burnished amber; her "Pupille amate" was a small miracle of legato,

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phrased as if Mozart had already discovered Idomeneo. Martina Russomanno's Cinna, all incisive attack and rhythmic bite, made the conspirator credible as a political animal rather than a mere plot device. And Lilit Davtyan's Celia — the role that first-time librettist Gamera almost throws away — became, in her hands, the ethical centre: her pleas for mercy sung with a translucent, almost sacred tone that seemed to point ahead to La clemenza di Tito twenty years early.

The Bachchor Salzburg, prepared by Michael Schneider, delivered the great tribunal choruses with an ensemble discipline that made the Felsenreitschule's stone acoustics work for rather than against them. Fischer's tempi were brisk but never breathless; his edition — a two-and-a-half-hour distillation of the original — sacrificed some da capos but preserved every psychological hinge.

What emerged, in the end, was not a museum piece but the sound of a fourteen-year-old genius reaching, sometimes overreaching, toward something he did not yet have a name for: characters who think while they sing. Kajtna-Wönig and Fischer trusted that reach — trusted the singers, trusted Mozart, trusted the audience — and were rewarded with an ovation that turned a "semi-staged" matinee into one of the festival's quietly essential evenings. If this is what concentration on "the essential elements" looks like, opera seria has more life in it than we thought.

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