

Thomas Hampson on his late entry to Salzburg, the future of the Festival, Schlingensiefel, Netrebko and the world meeting of the brightest heads at which he is taking part in September.

## Heart and Mind - Thoughts of a Mastermind in Operatic Art

*By Heinz Sichrovsky*

There is practically nothing set yet in connection with the Salzburg Festival. Except one thing: when Thomas Hampson performs, it will be thrilling. And since he has not yet performed there this summer, as he was in Baden-Baden filming "Parsifal" with other prominent artists for a DVD production, the positive excitement was kept in limits. Now he will be joining the Salzburg concert scene:

- On Friday (13.8) he will be singing songs by Dvorak (who died 100 years ago) and Brahms in the sold-out Small Festival Theater.
- On the following Tuesday (17.8) one of his trend-setting song marathon events with colleagues will take place there: The focus is on Dvorak and his time, and the program ranges all the way to American folklore.
- On August 28 and 29 he will perform in another Dvorak program with the Philharmonic Orchestra – Harnoncourt conducting.

In September the mastermind of the opera stage faces a new challenge: at a symposium co-sponsored by NEWS on the theme "The Search for Meaning", he will meet with some of the most important masterminds of our time.

**NEWS:** You are not singing any opera this year in Salzburg. Is this intentional or was there nothing for you?

**Hampson:** It just didn't work out this time, and it isn't so bad to take a break for a summer. My strong presence here first began with "Doctor Faustus" in the Mortier era. But I don't consider Salzburg as pure opera festival and the marathons are of great personal importance to me. Next year I am planning something on the very exciting theme "Exiled Composers, Viennese School, Degenerate Music". This year the theme could be "The Beautiful World of Sound of the late 19<sup>th</sup> Century". Starting with Slavic music, I will explore the blooming late Romanticism of the Habsburg kingdom. The focus will be on the three American years of Dvorak, what he stimulated there but also which stimulations he received there, for example from Negro Spiritual and Indian folk songs.

**NEWS:** Next year you will be performing in another opera, although not the wildest of challenges, namely the Father Germont in "La Traviata".

**Hampson:** If the Salzburg Festival would decide on a new "Traviata" I would hope that new aspects would be presented that would place Germont as a philosophical challenge.

**NEWS:** The production is being put on the program for Anna Netrebko, of whom one reads is completely exhausted from all the media bustle. Rumors are even circulating that she is burned out. Do you see any reason for concern?

**Hampson:** I consider her a very sophisticated and clever singer, who has attracted quite a bit of attention around the world. This was quite gratifying for her, but eventually she must bear the cost of it. Publicity is an insatiable animal, and Anna must find her control gauge, her equilibrium. I can only hope that she has someone by her side who advises her well. We all

sometimes suffer from stages of burn-out. I myself am in need of vacation. But giving up and saying: I am burned out – that won't do.

**NEWS:** You have just completed filming a DVD production of "Parsifal" in Baden-Baden under the direction of Kent Nagano. Schlingensiefel received greater attention in Bayreuth, though.

**Hampson:** This is precisely why I want to highlight our outstanding production by Nikolaus Lehnhoff. I was not in Bayreuth, but I do regret some things: It all apparently has to do more with the director than with Wagner. It is not about the source of the work, not about the philosophical content, not about the score. But I was able to extensively inform myself about Schlingensiefel's new aspects. However, Wagner does interest me more. By the way, I don't consider the word "traditional" as invective. I don't consider it a credit to make a fuss about a production because it creates something that has never been thought or said. I have learned a lot from the ancient Chinese. There the word "boredom" is translated into "the endless search for something new."

**NEWS:** You have worked with Jürgen Flimm. What do you say to his big chances of becoming artistic director?

**Hampson:** I would prefer not to deal with names but with more serious matters, but I only ever hear or read about names and never what Salzburg actually should be. For example, that art is not commerce but the human interaction with the latter. Man's attempt to pool his sensibilities and skills to find his spiritual center. And if there is such a place where one can give these goals priority over the commercial then it is Salzburg. We should not search for a CEO there but someone again who has a clear artistic mandate of highest respectability and sensibility. Jürgen Flimm absolutely matches this image. But it is pointless to get someone every few years and to then let him try something. That's like putting the wagon before the horse.

**NEWS:** It is interesting that no one sought your or Harnoncourt's counsel.

**Hampson:** I wouldn't compare myself to Harnoncourt. But it is outrageous that he was not asked. I read with great interest in your publication what he had to say. And that no interest was shown from the official side is a crime. He is one of the most brilliant, most educated and contemplative artists I know.

**NEWS:** There could be an advisory board of artists, among them Welser-Möst. Were you not invited to be part of it?

**Hampson:** I did not have a single discussion on Salzburg but I also do not want to overestimate myself. One should rather hear what Harnoncourt asked: how are the tremendously high prices legitimized. If this is only a commercial summer operation that does not differ from what is offered the rest of the year every where else, it will be difficult. That's why I find the idea of an advisory board very good. On condition that it is not just an alibi and namedropping.

**NEWS:** You are taking part in a symposium on September 11 and 12 at Melk Abbey with three Nobel Prize winners and representatives of world religions. What can an artist like you contribute in this circle in a time of crisis and sentiments of meaninglessness to the search for meaning?

**Hampson:** Yes, what to do when the link to the community is lost? In other words: when one loses the meaning in one's life? I think the meaning is called God. He can be named otherwise as well – spirituality, Karma – but the meaning is always the same: the question why we are alive and which direction we should go. I cannot answer that, but I do feel qualified in one thing: to keep in the remembrance of humanity the many epochs and cultures who have all searched for meaning. Art always had an immense answer to the search for meaning. Because it is responsible for one thing: for compassion in the literal sense – sympathy. Thus the individual is no longer left alone and the search becomes a common one. We performing artists are responsible for not letting any of this be forgotten, what the creative artists have heard and seen. This task of ours requires above all one thing: humility.

