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Press Text: Terrace Talk on *Capriccio*

“One must have the courage to play with the soft notes.”



Christian Thielemann

(SF, 25 July 2024) Following yesterday’s dress rehearsal, Christian Thielemann offers a glimpse of this year’s first opera of the Salzburg Festival, Richard Strauss’ *Capriccio*. Since his earliest youth, he says, he has been fascinated by Strauss’ “incredible virtuosity at orchestration”, while also pointing out the dangers therein. He admits he has had to learn to deal with it: for example, the importance of not slowing the tempo during cadenzas and avoiding too much sentimentality. Unlike Wagner’s, Strauss’ style changed over the years. Thielemann disagrees with the view that conductors are either good at Strauss or at Wagner. “Unlike many a ritardando or extreme gesture one can get away with in *Tannhäuser*, in *Tristan* or *Die Götterdämmerung*, it’s easy to be misled by Strauss”. Merely looking at the instructions of pianissimo or fortissimo in a Strauss score, one cannot deduce that there should be crescendi involved.

“In the case of Strauss, especially in *Der Rosenkavalier* or *Capriccio*, there are many pitfalls. Sometimes I tell the musicians: ‘Think of *Figaro* or of Mendelssohn, of the delicate ramifications in that music.’ Strauss’ scores are more likely to contain something like a suspicion, a hint of a rubato, but this needs to be dosed very carefully. The singers also benefit from this. If one would take all the dynamic instructions in *Die Frau ohne Schatten*, for example, at face value, the singers and the ears of the audience would quickly be done for.”

Asked about the title *Capriccio* and its form, a conversation piece beyond conventional norms, Thielemann says: “The idea was originally Stefan Zweig’s, but it disappeared from Richard Strauss’ desk for a long while before he took it up again. The sophistication of Strauss’ score

impresses me. I have conducted *Capriccio* many times now, but I keep discovering new elements, for example a little motif in the violas or the horn part". Another very special element is Strauss' *parlando*: "It is meant to give the impression that it is being spoken at that very moment." Strauss even wrote a preface to the score, in which he recommended reading rehearsals with the singers. Thielemann suggested that this would lead to many surprising situations being revealed, highlighting which word is the most important at certain junctions. He says that the piece serves up a "slight noblesse, a light form of condescension and irony", and that transporting all these nuances through language is important, necessitating close and repeated readings of the text. He considers the naturalness of this style related to the German *spieler*, citing Lortzing's *Zar und Zimmermann* and *Der Wildschütz* and Wagner's *Meistersinger* as examples. In his view, it is difficult for conductor and orchestra to support this, avoiding a thick string sound, for example. What's important to him is the pianissimo in the delicate web of string solos, for example in the sextet in *Capriccio*, which is marked piano throughout. "One must have the courage to play with the soft notes. That's what it's about, otherwise, the *parlando* cannot stand out." The Vienna Philharmonic, he adds, is of course ideally suited to this task.

Regarding the work's basic question – "Words or music?" – Thielemann comments: "To my mind, Strauss answered it at the end of the opera: the answer is indicated when the melody begins as the Countess says farewell to Flamand. Strauss offers an interesting discussion of the question – after all, there are good and bad musical settings, and there are good and bad texts."

Asked about the prevalent acoustic conditions, he says: "Ultimately, you have to find the right language for the orchestra vis-a-vis each singer and each house. Here at the Festspielhaus, we have found a good solution by raising the orchestra fairly high in the pit. The Vienna Philharmonic listens very carefully to the singers; the players react seismographically to the softest nuances."

When performing Strauss, he points out, it is necessary to keep in mind what instruments would have sounded like 100 years ago, for example trumpets. Today's forte is not the same as a forte then. Regarding the acoustic conditions, Thielemann adds: "In Salzburg, of course we benefit from my experience and that of the Philharmonic with the house: we hear very well in this theatre, and we know what is doable."

Concerning the many quotes Strauss uses in *Capriccio*, both of works by others and his own, Thielemann explains: "You have to bring that out without appearing didactic. Of course it helps if you know Strauss, and if you familiarize yourself with the story by reading the libretto." He considers concert performances advantageous in emphasizing the interaction between music and vocalism. Again, the familiarity between himself and the Vienna Philharmonic pays off: he describes it as a kind of "musical ping-pong".

Asked why Strauss wrote the piece at this particular time, which was marked by the vagaries of World War II, and whether in his opinion this points to aspects such as regime criticism or escapism, Thielemann says: "Fundamentally, the work is the greatest criticism of the regime imaginable. By setting something totally different against the circumstances and thereby ignoring them, he makes a statement. His silence says everything, basically."

His book about Richard Strauss, due to be published in September 2024, was written with the idea to point out kapellmeister traditions which he fears might be lost. These include the treatment of dialogues when working with singers. In addition, he wanted to pass on his own experience with Strauss interpretations – also regarding potential sources of error.

He points out that he has worked with almost all the singers in Salzburg's *Capriccio* previously, describing the ensemble as voices with strong personalities who are well-matched to one another.

Photo link: <https://www.salzburgerfestspiele.at/en/photos/capriccio-2024>

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