

Music

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Promoting Means Taking Risk

Lothar Knessl, curator of the Erste Bank Composing Commission, in conversation with Irene Suchy

Stravinsky once remarked that bankers liked best to talk about music while composers preferred to converse about money. The Figdors, the Arnsteins, the Liebens were financiers – also of art. Entertainment and earning a livelihood belong in some way together. Mr Fellingner, the director of Siemens Vienna, and his wife were Brahms's patrons. The Erste Bank Composing Commission is a continuation of the historically productive and close relationship between financial institutions and those who create music. The curator of this award is Lothar Knessl, who as chief press officer of the Vienna State Opera has been shaped by a life-long connection with music and who, through his activities as a curator and his work for ORF Radio Ö1, enjoys the status of expert in the difficult genre of the most modern music.

Irene Suchy: Mr. Knessl, what is the history of this prize?

Lothar Knessl: As in so many cases in Vienna the first impulse came from Claudio Abbado, someone who quite simply has received far too little recognition.

But isn't it Abbado himself who tends to withdraw?

Abbado polarises – but it would be a good thing if he could be persuaded again to undertake a number of things for Vienna. But whatever about this, Claudio Abbado was involved in the beginnings of the Erste Bank Composing Commission as well as in the start of the Wien Modern festival.

What are the criteria for awarding the prize?

I stand behind it with my name and reputation. There is no jury. Nevertheless, it is not a one-man decision because the performance must be coordinated with the arrangements of the Konzerthaus. My suggestions have never been rejected the general management. I make them two to three years in advance.

By now it has become a success list for the composer and for the body making the award.

Is this the first criterion?

The prize is intended to provide help in starting off. At the presentation concert other works by the composer are played, that is to say not just the recently written works. In addition, during this period I attempt to secure other grants for the composer: from the federal state, from the City of Vienna. The intention is to initiate two or three impulses. Generally this is successful, if it doesn't succeed at least an attempt was made. There is always this risk with things that one doesn't know.

Whom do you have your eye on in the future? Bernd Richard Deutsch?

I am still battling for him.

Against whom? Who else has a say?

The Konzerthaus, the Klangforum. Sometimes I am tough and say: he must take part, even if it doesn't suit you. But one cannot force a composer to make a work. The process starts

with conversations and questions such as: in what direction are you working at present? What kind of instrumentation are you interested in? Then I talk to the people in the Konzerthaus, enquire whether there is any interest in these ideas.

What is the prize made up of?

After it became established the prize lost something of its fame and publicity, which led me to initiate a reform. In its renewed form the structure of the prize means that the bank provides not only the prize money for the composer but also pays for the performances, so that three performances can be guaranteed, and a CD is made of the commissioned work. This remodelled package was agreed in the form of a three-year contract and extended with a further three-year contract.

Is there an ideal way of sponsoring?

Awarding a prize is not enough. The ideal way is to stimulate those who write music in a direction that they want to go in any case. And there must a guarantee that the works will be performed – if possible not only at a single performance – at a prominent location and at the right time by a well-known ensemble.

The Erste Bank Composing Commission is linked to cooperation with the Klangforum, which means mutual strengthening.

Yes – I am happy that the Klangforum under Sven Hartberger has joined in.

How do you stay informed?

I travel a great deal. I have just come back from Zurich where I attended the premiere of the HK Gruber's opera based on a text by H. C. Artmann.

This is the essence of sponsorship: to emphasize the beautiful aspects, to note what is good and to make it known.

Whereby the sponsor should make possible something that could not happen without him. This does not mean paying for Traviata at the Salzburger Festspiele, but nurturing projects that reflect the idea of sponsoring which is the encouragement of art. For me sponsorship involves taking a risk with something that hasn't existed before.

The risk of the patron?

Yes, an awareness of culture must be developed and naturally this is associated with a certain degree of risk. This philosophy of risk also fits in well with the expansion of the Erste Bank in the central and eastern European countries. There – in the Czech Republic, Slovakia and soon in Hungary too – the Erste Bank will be associated with this kind of awareness.

How can one encourage risk-taking?

By allowing and developing a flexible intellectual approach oneself, in much the same way as the Erste Bank demonstrates in its eastern European activities and in its sponsorship of composers. As a result the company can achieve a unique position with those information disseminators that set the tone. The issue is not to achieve a major resonance among the broad public but rather reaching a target group that is influential in the formation of opinion.

How important is the reaction of the public to you? Composers, from Puccini to Wagner, have made very different statements in this respect. At one stage did you also hate the public?

Naturally I am happy when a piece whose quality I have recognized meets with a positive general reception from the listeners. How does the public at festivals of new music in

Donaueschingen or in Schwaz react? The public has become more tolerant. The scandal of the uproar at Schönberg's concerts, like in 1913 is almost unimaginable today. I only once experienced a premiere by Philip Glass at which the public burst into unanimous booing. Nowadays, if I experience lukewarm reactions from a public to five completely different pieces then I am disappointed. I don't attach much importance to the opinion of such a public.

I remember the late director of Universal Edition, Alfred Schlee, once turning around to me at a concert and asking me in amazement after a piece: "Why are people applauding?"

Erste Bank Composing Commission

list of prize winners:

1989 Herbert Willi

1990 Gerhard E. Winkler

1991 Christian Ofenbauer

1992 Gerd Kühn

1993 Georg Friedrich Haas

1994 George Lopez

1995 Herbert Grassl

1996 no award

1997 Olga Neuwirth

1998 Christian Mühlbacher

1999 Thomas Heinisch

2000 Alexander Stankovski

2001 Germán Toro Pérez

2002 Johannes Maria Staud

2003 Clemens Gadenstätter

2004 Wolfram Schurig

2005 Wolfgang Mitterer

Musicologist and music journalist Irene Suchy writes, reads and talks about musik, also in Ö1 radio. This year she will write/contribute to "Gulda" published by Brandstätter, and "Paul Wittgenstein", published by Brenner Studien.