

UNCHARTED WATERS – HOW TO START A NEW SEASON IN THE PANDEMIC.

For the relaunch of the City of Music Talks Gunnar Geßner and Christiane Hein invited an experienced newcomer to the Hannover music scene. Stephan Zilias arrived at his new domain, the Staatsoper Hannover, during the COVID-19 pandemic. The well-known director had left his position as a Principal Conductor at the Deutsche Oper Berlin and moved with his wife and children into their new home just before the first lockdown in Germany: a very peculiar situation for starting his job as the new General Music Director (GMD).

However, the “general” had already met his “troops” in November 2019 and January 2020. Although his new position involved a lot of staff responsibility (such as organizing short-time working during the pandemic), as someone not fond of hierarchies, he felt comfortable with the idea that the musicians had their say in choosing the GMD. A well-organized orchestra office and close links with the artistic director and the concert dramaturg helped him to overcome the initial challenges.

One of the most important tasks for a GMD is the choice of repertoire. “Choosing a repertoire you love increases the chances of a good result,” Zilias says.

But he is also open to less familiar musical works: “There are some pieces that I don’t understand at first but the result is great in the end,” he admits. And there are some that warrant rediscovery: “At one point I couldn’t stand Beethoven any longer because I was fed up with his symphonies. But I found my way back to them through his chamber music.” Zilias loves the feeling of receiving a new score and leafing through it for the first time: “It’s like having a first walk through freshly fallen snow.”

Zilias’ musical career was not predetermined, even though both of his parents were musicians: “They have always supported me but they never pushed me,” he remembers. After high school he thought of becoming a lawyer, but he feels that would have been an act of self-betrayal: “If I hadn’t become a musician, I would have become a different person, and I didn’t want that.” He studied piano and conducting in Cologne but he never wanted to work as a pianist: “You can work on a great variety of styles and on many harmonic levels with a piano, but conducting is somehow the same, even though I sometimes don’t really know what a conductor is actually doing,” he jokes.

8. CITY OF MUSIC-TALK

WITH: Stephan Zilias
General Music Director of
the Staatsoper Hannover
staatstheater-hannover.de

Date: 2 September 2021
Where: KUBI, Hannover



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The new GMD starts from the notion that by doing his job well, he somehow becomes superfluous: “The ideal situation is when the musicians know exactly what to do and you have almost nothing to do.” To get there, however, is a lot of hard work. “The rehearsal process is not like classroom teaching,” Zilias explains, reflecting on the integral role of the internal communication between the musicians in the orchestra pit: “Even senior conductors can learn a lot from their experience every day.” Yet although Zilias does not see himself in the role of teacher, it is still a two-way process: “I know the kind of feedback that is helpful and the kind I’d rather keep to myself.”

Although music is integral to his life, Zilias has multiple other interests. He loves to spend time with his two children and regularly meets with non-musician friends from high school for a change of scenery. He loves jogging and enjoys the green space in Hannover. It may be smaller than Berlin, but it is feels more manageable: “In Berlin I feel like I have to run after the city, but not in Hannover. Wherever I go, the city is always there.” The GMD wants to conquer the city, playing outside of the opera house and meeting people outside his comfort zone. “There are lots of great places here in Hannover.”

Zilias wants to inspire the audience: “If art is well done, it also changes you as a person,” he claims. “Music cannot save the world but it can save people.” Zilias also believes music can address societal problems like diversity: “In the US you see a much wider performance repertoire of work composed by persons of colour or women than you do in Germany,” he says. “Our orchestra is gender balanced but we have very few persons of colour or Muslim musicians. This is something that takes a lot of time.” Nonetheless, he is convinced that opera as a form of art will never become outdated: “We are not doing old-fashioned stuff. If it’s well done, it has to be relevant for our life today and you don’t need to be ashamed of it because it’s 300 years old. I don’t think that this kind of music will ever die.”

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