

Seeing Music

Bremen art gallery proprietor Katrin Rabus has been holding the International Television Forum for Music under the motto “The Look of the Sound” in cooperation with the ARD, Deutsche Welle and Arte broadcasting stations as well as the city of Bremen since 2002. The Forum took place for the fifth time from 11 to 14 March.

"I don't think that interest in classical music has reached a low point. However, we undoubtedly have to speak up volubly in these times of an extremely “noisy” media environment." Peter Maniura, head of Classical Music at BBC Television and the author of this statement, had a spectacular idea for winning over a broader public last year. Stars of public life who are not musicians were invited to a conductor competition. A political commentator, an actress and a comic had to take the plunge and conduct a “real” symphony orchestra. After that they received instruction, had to conduct again and finally the two best were given the chance to present Beethoven's Fifth in the final. The entire process was documented at prime time in different BBC programmes.

Peter Maniura explained the crazy but stirring idea with great enthusiasm at the fifth Bremen Television Forum. “You take television as a medium and play with it, and you trust in the power of the music. That is the decisive aspect: the music is not changed, not betrayed! But we have taken elements from reality TV, elements from entertainment shows, from documentary films, from competitions. There is, in fact, a Karajan Conductor Competition, for instance.” The final took place in conjunction with the legendary London Proms Festival.

Intelligent, entertaining, one can hardly advertise one's own cause and at the same time fulfil television's educational mission. The sales and Internet downloads of Beethoven's Fifth shot up by 40 percent as a result. Thomas Beck, head of Culture at the Swiss Television, reports of a similarly spectacular format. Last year Verdi's “La Traviata” was performed at the central railway station in Zurich and shown live on TV at prime time. The viewer ratings were over 35 percent and La Traviata performances in the Zurich Opera House were sold out after that.

The Bremen Television Forum is held by gallery proprietor Katrin Rabus every one to two years. Support is provided by the ARD, Deutsche Welle and Arte broadcasting stations. Katrin Rabus, who was a member of the ARD broadcasting council for several years, selects current films and topics with diverse perspectives. In addition to a multifaceted programme, which presented current film performances of classical and modern music and pointed out new trends in music films, there were discussion forums with internationally renowned directors, producers and experts concerning such topics as concert formats on the Internet and new music formats on television. Georg Wübbolt's “Filmstar Karajan” was devoted to a major figure from the beginnings of the music film. Karajan was the first conductor who created his own film productions and skilfully made use of the new medium for the purpose of self-staging. Moreover, two films on the Youth Orchestra of Venezuela and the social background of the members were shown.

Every year the Bremen Television Forum focuses on one director. In 2009 it was Canadian Larry Weinstein, who puts across his themes in a very open and imaginative fashion, with a wonderful musical and psychological feel and artistic visual technique, and presents composers to a lay audience in a very special way. “September Songs” about Kurt Weill is a kind of revue, “Ravels Gehirn” (“Ravel's Brain”) documents medical aspects of the composer's fatal disease while “Mozartkugeln” takes a humorous look at Mozart fanaticism all over the world.

The approach in Oliver Becker's film “Dem kühlen Morgen entgegen” on Dmitri Shostakovich, by contrast, is quite different. Becker focuses on prominence and originality.

On the one hand, there is the well-known actor Armin Müller-Stahl, who plays the role of the director in the film who sets off on the trail of the great Russian composer. On the other hand, Oliver Becker portrays Shostakovich's life through scenes with marionette figures. In this way he avoids the often banal effect of reconstructed scenes. The break with known elements is stark, the result is that the central focus shifts to emotional facets thanks to the artistic representation.

The Bremen Television Forum offered a gratifyingly broad spectrum of the presentation of music in film and television. It was striking that in most cases directors seek an original approach, a poetic way of portraying their theme. Rarely does the director appear in the film as an interviewer. They try to "compose" a story using a wide variety of means. "It annoys me," says French director Bruno Monsaingeon, "when films need a commentator who tells the viewers what they should think. You have to leave the door open for an interpretation. I can imagine a commentator only in short informative films, otherwise I feel this is a sign of laziness and weakness, a means of compensating for what was not "elicited" from the artist portrayed." Monsaingeon is one of the stars of the music film scene, he has already created legendary portraits of Yehudi Menuhin, Glenn Gould, Sviatoslav Richter and David Oistrakh. "The point is that you have to try to translate an individual feeling into a feeling that has a universal message. That's what it means to make a film." In his most recent film Monsaingeon portrays Polish pianist Piotr Anderszewski, who – similar to Chopin – left his Polish home and lives in Paris and Lisbon, but does not deny his Polish heart. Monsaingeon finds a tremendously powerful poetic means of expression to depict Anderszewski's restlessness. Large parts of the film take place on a train moving through the wintry Polish countryside. For the film Anderszewski plays piano on the train.

The presentation in Bremen of an over forty-year-old film of Beethoven's "Eroica" with the Berlin Philharmonic under Herbert von Karajan by now 78-year-old Hugo Niebeling was a nice contrast to the innovative television formats and the different director's signatures. Karajan rejected Hugo Niebeling's congenial visual translation of Beethoven's Eroica at that time. Presumably Niebeling's personal artistic signature was too overpowering for him. Now, however, the film will soon be shown – in all likelihood on 3sat – with the consent of Karajan's heirs. The viewer doesn't see that the orchestra plays to the playback. Only in this way is the multitude of shots possible, explains Hugo Niebeling; "his" Eroica has 996 cuts, he adds. At the end of the first movement, for example, the high point, the pace of the cuts also increases. In the picture an expansive trumpet bell screams at us like an open mouth, in front of it kettledrum sticks swirl, the contrabassists stroke their eighth notes with tremendous dynamics and Herbert von Karajan's powerful hand movements change in rhythm with the kettledrum beats. It seems as if lightning is flashing, that's how fast the picture cuts are. It has an enormously modern effect. Hugo Niebeling used this fascinating visual technique, creating an additional dimension to Beethoven's music and to Karajan's interpretation, once before for Beethoven's "Pastorale". Karajan agreed to that production. It is also available as a DVD. Excitedly Hugo Niebeling mentioned a comment that a Frenchman once sent him: "Here you can see music!"

Elisabeth Richter