

TODAY'S ZAMAN

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Lockenhaus Chamber Music Festival offers alternative delights

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The old American song lyric, "How ya gonna keep 'em down on the farm after they've seen Páree (Paris)," applies to me after being at the Lockenhaus Chamber Musical Festival in Austria.

Nestled in the charming village of Lockenhaus in the green hills of Burgenland in eastern Austria, the festival is one of thousands of summer music festivals in Europe. However, while most offer mainstream classical-era programming with token samples from other centuries, Lockenhaus offers the reverse template, and with unexpected bonuses within this season's innovative schedule of 16 concerts.

My "Paris" of European summer chamber music was founded in 1981 by violinist Gidon Kremer -- recipient of the İstanbul Music Festival's Lifetime Achievement Award in 2011 -- who renounced routine programming, preferring that the musicians choose what they want to play. He also opened the rehearsals to the public and invited composers to write music for him and his colleagues. His anti-establishment spirit created a haven for people who didn't want to ignore the other five centuries of music and were willing to receive new works with open ears. In 2012, Kremer passed the baton to cellist Nicolas Altstaedt, who has retained some of Kremer's traditions, and is now busy putting his own mark on the festival.

After the 10 days (July 3-12) at Lockenhaus' third edition of Altstaedt's leadership, hearing stellar interpretations of lesser-known works and premieres of new ones, my report is glowing.

The lineup of 52 artists was the crème de la crème of the young generation of international musicians, as well as seasoned artists like the wonderful pianists Alexander Lonquich, José Gallardo and Aleksandar Madzar, and actor Michael Dangl, who narrated several works with speaker scripts. This year, Swiss composer Helena Winkelmann was the composer-in-residence, and two of her scores were performed.

Altstaedt chooses themes to thread through the programming each year. The

first was a self-explanatory “Metamorphosis,” the second year was a thought-provoking “Crime and Punishment” and this year “Fiction” scripted the programs, the first of which included a theater piece by Juha Siltanen, created as a context for Franz Schubert’s “Octet” for winds and strings. The concert selections had numerous references to literature and the daily printed program notes included excerpts from E.T.A. Hoffman’s series of writings from the early 1800s about art and music.

“It’s all about building connections to the background of the score,” Altstaedt told Today’s Zaman. “Take Saint-Saëns’ ‘Carnival of the Animals,’ for example. He didn’t want it played until after his death because the animals he illustrated in the music were satirical symbols [of prominent people and events of the time]. People should know why.”

“Fiction” is also the title of an album by the extraordinary French string quartet Quatuor Ébène, who performed during the last three days of the schedule. That ensemble’s definition of “fiction” is, as they stated in the program notes, the “false reality” of a string quartet’s historical definition. By crossing the genres of jazz, classical, rock, even weaving in their own singing voices as they play, Quatuor Ébène challenges every barrier that might restrict musical expression.

Crossing over from classical to jazz

In the way that Ébène so easily blends genres, other musicians at Lockenhaus this year also swung back and forth from classical to jazz. Austrian violinist Benjamin Schmid played a jazz concert with his trio one night, and the next night switched to classical. Tina Thing Helseth, a young Norwegian trumpet player, did the same. The conservatory-trained Helseth’s opinion of the term “crossover” is almost a non-issue: “Good music is good music. I play anything I think is cool,” she told Today’s Zaman. “As long as I can use my ‘voice’,” remains her only criterion.

Schmid feels the term is “not necessary, because I’m not trying to crossover. I’m not worrying about my identity. I’m an interpreter rather than a creator.” His jazz trio -- with pianist Antoni Donchev and bassist Georg Breinschmid -- offered a boisterous brew of Balkan rhythms, arrangements of music by Kurt Weill, jazz standards and a bit of physical comedy. “For this, I use a different bow technique,” he said. “It’s more connected to folk music.”

For his classical performance of the sublime Suite, Opus 23 by Erich Korngold with violinist Ilya Gringolts, cellist Altstaedt and pianist Madzar, Schmid’s bow technique was more aligned with “tone production and projection,” he explained. Schmid, despite his dazzling classical chops, feels he has “huge respect for jazz musicians. When I meet good ones, I’m the happiest person in the world.”

Contemporary gems

Jazz rhythms -- and a reference to the theme from "The Pink Panther" -- also crept into Winkelman's string orchestra composition "Bandes dessinées" (Comic strips), for which she had drawn a series of animal sketches, shown as slides, describing a dog-eat-dog habitat. Expertly conducted by Christoph Altstaedt, this piece was a political symphony of devastation and perhaps an edgy update on Saint-Saëns' "Carnival." With its insatiable propulsive drive, the effect was terrifying.

Winkelman's string quartet, "Quadriga," performed by the Schumann Quartet (violinists Erik and Ken Schumann, violist Liisa Randalu, and cellist Mark Schumann) was a gentler world, but equally dynamic in its fierce, otherworldly language.

Matan Porat's "Durch Nacht und Wind" (Through Night and Wind), the title of which is a partial quote from Goethe's poem and Schubert's solo song "The Erlkönig," is a tale told by the father of a feverish child about how Death is riding a horse in the night to pay a visit to them. Porat, using only two instruments, created an eerily accurate portrait of a post-apocalyptic biosphere in flux.

Salvatore Sciarrino's "Dialoghi sull'ultima corda" (Conversations on the highest string) for two cellos received its world premiere here. The inspired and delicate piece used only soft effects like harmonics, squeaks, slides and sighs to suggest a dissonant cross-talk that eventually joined into one consonant voice.

Seeding the future

To ensure Lockenhaus' future, Altstaedt has added the Lockenhaus Strings, a group of accomplished student musicians who are on board to rehearse works requiring larger forces, and participate in all the aspects of the festival. "This was important for me when I was a student," said Altstaedt. "Gidon always had student participants. This is how it goes to the next generation." And Altstaedt's "Lockenhaus on Tour" program takes chamber music to European venues during the winter season to promote the festival.

Dieter and Ute Paul, a couple from Munich who have attended Lockenhaus for the past 14 years, told Today's Zaman: "Part of the fun here is not knowing in advance what they will play," referring to the house tradition of not announcing the programs until just before the performance. "And the open rehearsals," added Dieter. "That's a wonderful opportunity to hear how they put it all together."

Not all of the lesser-known works performed at Lockenhaus this year were as satisfying as most; nevertheless, I appreciate the opportunity to hear them. The bulk of thousands of instrumental chamber works from the 16th century to the present day remains sadly neglected. For those who seek a wider horizon than the typical top-40 classical-era programming, a festival like Lockenhaus remains

a precious jewel -- and well worth the effort to attend and support.

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Arts & Culture

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