

## Award ceremony Goethe Medal 2014

Nike Wagner: Laudatory speech for Gerard Mortier

(Check against delivery)

He is no longer among us.

Gerard Mortier passed away at the age of seventy this past March. The opera houses and festivals knew who they were mourning; the art world as a whole knew it. "One would have to go back to Sergei Diaghilev to come upon a similarly visionary art enabler," wrote the music critic from the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* in his obituary. Gerard Mortier received the news and was pleased about receiving the Goethe Medal.

Mortier became famous for his reforms of musical theatre and artistic production concepts, the polemicist in him was welcomed; able to cut even the most pompous establishments – such as the Vienna Philharmonic – down to size. Until it seemed that Mortier was called upon whenever a musical theatre became bogged down in routine or in self-complacency. The diminutive, dignified, ever polite and elegant baker's son from Ghent would restore maiden aunt opera's social role – and what's more – its existential significance.

How did this come about?

Born in 1943, the Jesuit alum initially studied law. After assistant positions at the Flanders Festival, he completed his apprenticeship in the management offices of operas in Frankfurt, Düsseldorf, Hamburg and Paris. "Apprenticeship" is probably not the proper term for it for why, after 1973, his time under Christoph von Dohnany, should the Oper Frankfurt experience such a new era? Suddenly the opera was presenting dramaturgically sophisticated productions by newcomers such as Volker Schlöndorff, Achim Freyer and Klaus-Michael Grüber.

But then it really began rolling. The Brussels Opera blossomed and gained international renown once Mortier took office as its director in 1981. Mortier's Brussels Mozart cycle became legendary. In place of the ever-same Mozart methods of Viennese and Salzburg provenance, they now showed psychological penetrance, revealed political power mechanisms, presented wonderfully selected vocalist ensembles. Big names in directing appear – actually more spoken theatre names – such as Ruth Berghaus, Peter Stein, Peter Sellars, Patrice Chéreau, Luc Bondy and Ursel and Karl-Ernst Herrmann. Even then, his favourite conductor was Sylvain Cambreling, the opera's GMD. His musicality was exemplary; hardly anyone could combine sensuality and analytical capacity as he could. Mortier had found his alter ego. Although not a fan of Wagner, with Cambreling he also unveiled Herbert Wernicke's sensational Ring of the Nibelung in Brussels.

Later, in Salzburg, he worked with such diverse directors as Peter Mussbach, Robert Wilson and Christoph Marthaler, and later yet, when he began the work of airing out the stuffy Grand Opéra in Paris, he called to him the wild ones from the east – Dmitri Cherniakov and Krzysztof Warlikowski. In Madrid, his last post as artistic director, Austrian film director Michael Haneke also bestowed triumphs on Mortier with his *Cosi*. One of Mortier's striking character traits is his aptitude for continuity. Just as he tenaciously pursued his visions for musical theatre against all opposition, he also remained true to "his" artists, repeatedly bringing them back to his stages, creating a worldwide art family.

Basically, nothing changed when, after ten years as artistic director in Brussels, Mortier moved on for another ten years in Salzburg. He knew what he could and wanted to do, he was in the summer of his life and raised plenty of “summer storms” (Gerhard Rohde). He raised them against the corrupt, even mafia-like practices of the music industry, against the domination of the record industry and the rampant celebrity cult, against orchestral substitution practices and stubborn politicians, against cultural tourists and neo-feudal sponsors – against everything that had aesthetically innovative and socially relevant music and theatre culture in a stranglehold. The fearlessness with which Mortier acted merely from the impetus of the man of arts, of the artist director, was as impressive as it was spectacular. Back then, only the radical (and witty) Pierre Boulez had a similarly idiosyncratic and confident touch.

The backdrop for his operating and agitating could not have been better, though. Mortier not only encountered a Salzburg of glamour society where wealthy American women went about in brocade dirndls, but also a Salzburg that was artistically paralyzed. The interpretative culture of the Karajan era had become increasingly marble-smooth and Mortier went up against it with a composition-based culture: a paradigm shift. Now, it was the works that shone – mainly those of the twentieth century – and not the celebrity interpreters. Suddenly, on an equal footing alongside Mozart and Richard Strauss, other names appeared as well; names like Janáček, Stravinsky, Bartók, Berg, Messiaen, Dallapiccola and Ligeti. Or works like Berlioz’ *Les Troyens* that had never really made it into the opera repertoire were put on the schedule.

Hatred foamed up against Mortier in letters to the editor, among the opera gourmands and in “fine society.” Although the “classics” remained the pillars of Mortier’s season schedules, they were now prodded for the problems and sensibilities of the present day. Mozart was no longer chocolate coated, but explored in “Mozart Workshops”: never mind *genius loci*. The traditionalists will not forgive him for that.

What, then, was the essence of Mortier’s opera dramaturgy? “I was an opera freak,” he once said, “but I was fascinated with the new movements in theatre.” He attempted to transfer the visions of modern theatre to opera. Mortier truly created music / theatre. He demanded modern reinterpretations of the scores and originals both from the musicians and the stage crew along the lines of the egalitarian inspired theatre of Peter Stein, Ariane Mnouchkine or Patrice Chéreau. The “Schaubühne generation” was a first love for Mortier, the world citizen who spoke four languages fluently and was “socialized” in the musical theatre of Germany. Whereby we must very clearly differentiate between the aesthetic currents in theatre; Mortier was never a ruffian, never a rampant experimenter. He demanded proficiency, precision and meticulousness from his artists in a very traditional sense. He once complained that he was too often and wrongly considered a proponent of “director’s theatre.” He had major issues with the “postdeconstructivists.” In an interview in November 2013 he said, “Just throw some teddy bears on the stage and you’ve got a solution for *Turandot* – you’ve lost me there.” His conceptual dramaturgy also involved pulling the participating artists together from the very beginning: how would an opera sound if the conductors would work together with the director and the stage designer? Questions were asked; “operas” were not simply staged.

Mortier also always chose works that he deemed had something essential to offer our age; regardless of how “old” they may have been in origin. Claudio Monteverdi was on hand as early as his second season in Salzburg and he had already taken Handel’s *Giulio Cesare* to Pflingsten Barock while still based in Brussels. Thanks to his midwifery, his little festival within a festival called *Zeitfluss* (flow of time), which arose from the local Salzburg subculture and was dedicated to contemporary music, brought forth not only countless Luigi Nono productions, but fundamentally new festival concepts.

Mortier was able to draw on his experience as director of the Ruhr Triennale between 2002 and 2004 and implement his “creations,” theatrical works of art within variable spaces with new forms of movement.

But Mortier was not only combative. He wanted to see his ideas realized and be successful. But if he, as he said, did not go from Brussels to Salzburg, “to satisfy the Chamber of Commerce,” he had to be cunning and clever. He knew the market. Uncompromising in aesthetic matters, in public he did adapt himself to “marketable” strategies; behaving gaudily, moved, busy, loud to shrill, and made every effort to fuel public discussion about art. The public loved it and was soon drawn to take his side. He was well aware how little his artistic will mattered to the inner circle; to the politicians and trustees. The charm unleashed by Mortier within the dens of the funding lions and corporate bosses, often conjuring the entirety of the European cultural tradition to find an ear for the future, was overwhelming. He always spoke in a low, somewhat sardonic voice, both to express rebuffs and his passionate beliefs.

The passing of Gerard Mortier has brought “an end to an era” (Eleonore Büning) although there are more than a handful of students and disciples who, as after his Pentecost miracle, will go and carry his teachings to all the world. For his work in Europe, for the *homme de lettres* and *homme du théâtre*, for his relentless work on human values, we honour Gerard Mortier with the Goethe Medal. Let me give Gerard Mortier the last word:

“The theatre is a religion of humanity,” he wrote in the preface of his posthumously published *Dramaturgie d'une passion*. Its role is to “break the routine of everyday life, to question the acceptance of economic, political and military force as normality, make the community aware of issues of human existence that cannot be controlled by law, and to affirm that the world can be better than it is.”