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Portrait: Karl-Heinz Schuetz

„Playing the flute is like telling stories“

Karl-Heinz Schuetz

Marco Lehmann-Waffenschmidt in conversation with Karl-Heinz-Schuetz in Vienna

MLW: The Vienna Philharmonic must be regarded here as an almost metaphysical institution – a friend of mine recently suggested that “ordinary mortal people knew the members of the Philharmonics only from hearsay” ...

KHS: ... (laughs) thanks, luckily it's not as bad as that. When I moved here from Stuttgart eight years ago, I did notice the high level of social appreciation for music in general! Your friend is very welcome to come to the concerts of the “Chamber music cycle at the Vienna State Opera”, where once a month, like today, members of the Philharmonics perform in chamber music ensembles, and we will be approachable in the intermission and after the concerts. Meet and greet – so to say!

MLW: The pieces of today's chamber music event in the State Opera, which you will join as flutist, were all written by French composers – Debussy, Ravel and Jean Cras – what's your concept behind that?

KHS: French music doesn't get played that often in Vienna, and I feel a special affinity to it. Debussy's trio for flute, viola and harp is undoubtedly one of the key works of the flute repertoire. Unlike Debussy and Ravel, Jean Cras is a rather unknown composer nowadays. He was a musician, but in his mail job served in the Marine Corps, eventually in the rank of an admiral. The “Cras'sche Winkelmasser”, a nautic angle meter he invented to support navigation on sea was indeed effective until satellite navigation systems took over in our days – not bad, I'd say! This meticulousness, by the way, can also be found in the almost over precise metronome instructions which strike out in his otherwise rather impressionistic score. You can't miss your destination. French music will attract the audience rather by letting them plunge into a beautiful surface, that does make a difference to Mozart and Haydn.

MLW: Does your crammed calendar of the orchestra leave you space for other musical activities?

KHS: Yes, of course! Like my colleagues I like to do a lot of other projects – as a soloist and as a chamber musician. That's a lot of fun and the completion of the musician's part of my life!

MLW: You're a member of the “doremis Ensemble”, a name merged by the initial letters of the family names of your three former colleagues with the Vienna Symphonic and yours – did you deliberately chose the reference to the solmi pattern?

KHS: Actually it was done rather by chance! We were touring a lot with this ensemble, our repertoire being based on Mozart's flute quartets, while we were quite versatile at the same time, playing the world premiere of “Bilder einer Einstellung” (Pictures of an Inhibition) which Alexei Igusdisman had written for us, and with our arrangements of Tom Jobims' “desafinado” and Johann Strauss' “Fledermaus” our repertoire is broad as well as Viennese

... (laughs). For a year now, however, we've been playing in larger formation as "doremis consorts" presently exploring Bach's Mass in B minor as well as the flute concertos by CPE Bach and Vivaldi. It's a hell of a lot of fun!

MLW: Can we hear you on CD with this ensemble?

KHS: While we've done many recordings for radio stations, the project CD still had to wait until now. You can find samples on my website (www.karlheinzschuetz.com).

MLW: After the sad passing of Wolfgang Schulz you are now his successor in the orchestra but also in his Ensemble Wien-Berlin?

KHS: Yes, the loss of Wolfgang is indeed very painful! We've lost one a really great artist there! I was fortunate to have the chance of playing in the orchestra with him at least once. And to follow him in his footsteps with his very own ensemble is a great honour and a big challenge for me!

MLW: When does the sound of the flute will touch the audience most?

KHS: I believe and hope that music moves the audience when performed with an honest attitude and a high level of concentration. As a musician I try to retrieve the emotion encrypted by the composer in his pieces. To connect the listener, first I have to fathom, what has to be "told", otherwise he won't understand and will be less moved – or not at all – by it. It's about making the certain something between the tones perceivable.

MLW: How does the musicians know, which story a composition embodies, hence what to tell?

KHS: Gut instinct, intuition and experience: there is no such thing as just one story in a composition. When doing an interpretation, it's always my job to be an investigator, to find and find out what the composer has hidden in his score! As musician I have to play as veritable and as authentic as I can. It's not about finding the one story that is allegedly true, but one that can fulfil the double claim – to be authentic for me as musician as well as to match the character of the piece: often this undertaking cannot take place without friction!

MLW: Can you give an example of such a "narration" on which a piece could be based on?

KHS: That's always an individual issue – situations and accounts of such a story are very personally embedded, for others these "self-made" imaginative narrations probably bear more questions than answers. I rather meant to refer to the process of developing an interpretation than to the actual performance. An idea or a story, as crazy as they might be, a colour or a painting can help to initiate the process of "Revitalization" of music encrypted on a sheet of paper. In the end, however, you also have to willing to dismiss a concept and let it go, if the spontaneity of the moment requests this!

MLW: Program music, like the Undine sonata, the Syrinx, the ballet music for Ascanio by Saint-Saens, which you have recorded on your new CD, or with the Danse de la Chèvre it's possible comprehend how such a story comes into existence, a story that will can be replayed inside while trying to find the equivalent expression in the performance. But what about abstract music, e.g. with the Prokofiev sonata?

KHS: For me the Prokofiev sonata is not abstract at all – it's a very pictorial music, there are obvious parallels to the music of his ballet "Romeo and Julia". There are very well defined characters in a pulsating story, which can absolutely be found and musically expressed in the sonata as well and through which this piece becomes so opulent next to its structure. Nonetheless emotion is not always the only thing requested: in Prokofiev's music the focus is more on general sentiments, the conception of the musical architecture, the axis, the important lines of the piece within.

MLW: One could say, that abstract music in the classical meaning does not exist, since every composition expresses emotional process – even a suite by Bach and Telemann, or Mozart's Andante in C Major ...

But how about the Sonatina by Boulez you've recently played at the flute festival in Freiburg?

KHS: To put it simply: I always try to find a lively, descriptive, playful access to the music I play, otherwise I'm in for problems. After all it's called "PLAYING the flute", isn't it? Everyone experiences and perceives music in a different way. But I think it's important, that music lives – in the most authentic way.

MLW: What about Brahms? – You've recorded two sonatas on your latest CD – and what do the words e.g. by Andersen, Taffanel and Doppler mean to you?

KHS: The personal preferences wander throughout the time. Brahms has always meant a lot to me, has been my favourite companion in the form of his symphonic music throughout my time with the Vienna Symphonic, and at one point the desire to play his sonatas has finally overcome me ... but the character pieces you've mentioned, enlighten the flute playing. They are short, concise. Pearls of our literature. They manage to show this lively and well humoured facet of the flute at its best advantage.

MLW: Let's come back to the "Undine" sonata by Reinecke. Despite the touching story, that can be either read in the narrative by Friedrich de la Motte Fouqué or heard and seen in the operas by E.T.A. Hoffmann and Lortzing, a musician might still face a concrete problem: as a flutist, how can I accomplish to activate the complex emotional structure of this piece, if you – let's say – have just come back from a very relaxing weekend, so completely unconnected to Undine's world?

KHS: Now we're talking about professionalism which the audience expects: Yes, this is always a challenge, and the growing demands of our time pressures many of us into a burn out. There are certainly different methods and ways, to deal with the musical task you're facing. If it's getting difficult, then part of the right way for me is to find some kind of "spyhole" to start with – with this I mean, finding one relevant aspect of the music to get closer to a piece again, to get a grip on a point of the compositions, which I can grip and feel. From this "Bench mark" I can then proceed on and gradually adopt the entire piece. To me it's a great help – psychologically as well as physically – to remember, "how it had felt" when I had performed this piece to my satisfaction before.

MLW: A kind of kinesthetic memory of something pleasant? ...

KHS: ... yes, and naturally it requests time and open mindedness.

MLW: What you're just been talking of, would you call it "flow"?

KHS: Yes, I guess it's called: a "flow".

A condition, which once might have occurred spontaneously, which I experienced and enjoyed – and which I revive by remembering so that I can feel it again. It's necessary for me to be able to reproduce afresh everything that can make Music an emotional experience for the one who listens. The world of opera is a very good example for this: when Rodolpho and Mimi come to life in the opera "Bohème", the singers will proceed emotionally through everything that happens on stage.

MLW: The most acclaimed singers of our time are guests of the Vienna State Opera – have you come across inspiring role models?

KHS: Yes, I'm thinking of Plácido Domingo as Simon Boccanegra in particular! The memories of his impersonation is still very lively in my inner eye. It gave me goose bumps at that time and I constantly had to watch him, was almost dangerous for my own playing! ... (laughs)

MLW: Would you draw an interpretative parallel between the character of an opera and our common flute repertoire?

KHS: Yes, definitely! We have a large segment of our repertoire which requests exactly this kind of identification. And generally speaking, as we've pointed out before, emotions can only be transmitted authentically to the audience, if the musician finds parallel situations experience by himself which he can use for his "re-creative" performance, by re-living them inwardly (again) – and manages to express them. Stanislavsky has expressed this very clearly for the art of acting.

MLW: Yes, Stanislavsky's work is important to all performing artists. However, in his later essays he partially turned away from the pure "Method of Identification", as he called it, which suggested that a singer had to be Rodolpho to the bone to be able to give a reliable impersonation of this character. He then put more emphasis on having the actor's performance not merely based on identification by inner experience but for a certain part also by "constructed psychophysical" actions in order to gain the audience's approval. Would you see a parallel applicable for music there?

KHS: Yes, I can see a parallel that would apply for music but also to all other forms of art: we generally have to proceed from a mere technical realization to a personalized and humanized concept of expression, no matter how far an artist can identify emotionally with what is happening within the piece of art he is dealing with. That is also a societal or let's call it a socio-political aim of mine.

MLW: How does all of this affect your teaching activities at masterclasses or at the State Conservatory of Music in Vienna, where you teach flute as major subject?

KHS: Musical and emotional phrasing is an essential issue during all stages of development while studying. Discovering your own personality can be a process that lasts your entire life and to express yourself authentically in the classical field is a challenge, because you have to pay attention to many "Dos and Don'ts". As a teacher you bear the responsibility for the development of your students. It's an area of conflict between searching and finding in which you're moving and you try to lead the students to a fair self-assessment and to strengthen their self-confidence. It's a teacher's job to offer support to the students so they will be able to express themselves musically and technically versed as well as with a personally authentic on the flute!

MLW: That would mean turning away from the "teacher-clone-student", which some decades ago had been a guiding model of teaching even for some of the prominent teachers?

KHS: Yes, absolutely. Away with that, although we should not forget how far the generations of our teachers has come with that. I have to admit that can be advantageous for a student being a parrot as well, in the sense of the psychophysical perception you mentioned.

MLW: How significant is praise in your teaching? André Jaunet e.g. is said to never have paid compliments.

KHS: Well, that must have been so in the past. Nicolet, too, has been rather tight-lipped in this respect. But times change and when I teach, I start by establishing a level of confidence, which naturally initiates by acknowledging the level the student has already accomplished. This confirmation can be called praise, and it's individually of different importance – but from there on we have to go on, otherwise in bothering to study at all.

MLW: ... when 13-year-old Denis Bouriakov auditioned for James Galway at the Weggis-classes for the first time Galway told him that he didn't know what he could teach him anymore ...

KHS: ... (laughs) in a case as this teaching becomes superfluous, although I have to admit that I know only little about the methodology and the didactics of James Galway. "Normally" a student should be willing and ready to give up some of what has been regarded as long proven by him in order to accept something new and important to him – which can even be substantial issues for playing the flute. I encourage him in doing so by first trying to point out the pattern he would give up and offer other options that I think are more suitable and promising – and I guide him on the way. Often, it's uncomfortable to give up the accustomed patterns, to open up to something new. You need persistence and patience for it.

MLW: Especially patience or the frustration level are delicate issues while studying...

KHS: ... patience bears success. Without patience you won't get far, not even when going shopping ... (laughs). A teacher must be able to keep an overview over the situation! It's important to keep a fine balance of the demands and requirements, you have to clearly outline your position and make milestones transparent and comprehensible

MLW: Looking back, what is it that you "taken with you" from your instruction by Eva Amsler, Philippe Bernold and Aurèle Nicolet? Do you feel "globalized" as a flutist, or do terms like French School or German School still matter to you?

KHS: I do regard the flute as generally globalized, but there are still regional preferences in sound and style. I was lucky to get a profound insight into both of the major styles, it's like Ying-and-Yang for me: the German "principle" of flute playing is somewhat earthy, coming from the bottom up, the French is glimmering and pearly, coming from above – together they form a whole, like the circle of Ying and Yang. Today I feel that my three teachers have carried this French-German field of tension in their natures. Eva has given me a solid base of musical instruction, basically French school with Swiss-German thoroughness, Philippe has sharpened my sense of charm and brilliancy of the flute, whenever necessary on "alsacien", and Aurèle has always helped me to explore the depths and background of the music and thus opened new horizons for me.

MLW: Aurèle Nicolet once gave up his professorship in Freiburg, among other reasons on the grounds that he didn't want to instruct excellent flutist with no chances of employment ...

KHS: His words certainly circulated back then, I'm sure he aimed at criticizing the system. Learning an instrument, however, is about something different. As musicians and as music teachers we have a cultural and a social mission – good instrumental instruction will lead automatically to reflect on yourself and this self-reflection will improve the "cultural quality" – meaning the perception of yourself in relation to the others. The options and chances for musicians as well as their perception by society have changed since then.

MLW: What's your part in your student's way to their career?

KHS: I'm regarding myself as a fairly experienced and encouraging mountain guide. Everyone follows a different path: they all have to walk on their own. It's my job to keep an eye on the weather and the malice and the pitfalls when moving through the mountains. Now matter how different they are: there are always situations where you have to express warnings and then there are situations where you have to encourage them: "Come on! Nothing bad is going to happen – if you just stand there and die of fear, you will be dead as well!" Of course it's particularly rewarding, if things run smoothly like with my student Karin Bonelli, who just won the audition and started her job with the flute section of the Vienna Philharmonic!

MLW: Does Karin Bonelli possess the "Viennese sound" that matches the orchestra and the wind section in particular?

KHS: Karin definitely met the expectations of the jury: she played excellently and won! She's a splendid piccolo flute player which is enormously important in her job and her sound

matches the special sound of the orchestra. This is of great importance, but that is commonly known.

MLW: What are the characteristics of the acclaimed sound of the Vienna Philharmonic?

KHS: Well, first of all: a “narrated sound” is like a “narrated dinner” ... (laughs) ... Everyone will describe it differently, but I’ll start with saying that this sound is seen as an archetype of sound for many people all over the world, in the past and in the present: he is again and again characterized by warmth, amplitude, roundness and homogeneity. Hearing this sound from within and being part of it’s production I’d say what makes us distinctive might come from paying great attention to each other and to the voices we hear every evening in the opera, as well as from the chamber music qualities the orchestral ensembles cultivate in the Musikverein! The artistic self-management of the Vienna Philharmonic, works with the most acclaimed guest conductors without having a chief conductor, is singular and is reflected hereby.

MLW: Percussion, French horns and oboes are obliged to a Viennese tradition in the way the instruments are made, but the flutes are usually “globalized” instruments, without a specific Viennese way of instrument making? ...

KHS: Correct, that doesn’t exist and this again has a tradition in the orchestra. Even Mahler asked for a “boehmfloetenden” (playing a flute by Boehm) Dutchman. Nowadays you’ll find mostly Japanese Instruments, which again have their roots in the French and in the German way of instrument making.

MLW: Which brand of flute do you play?

KHS: I’m playing a 24-carat Muramatsu golden flute an silver flute from Brannen ...

MLW: ... no wooden instrument?

KHS: Not at the moment – of course when I play piccolo flute which is sometimes requested in the opera. Piccolo is quite sensitive to the orchestral sound – someone once coined the expression “As a piccolo flute player, if you’re on good terms with all your colleagues, you’ve done something wrong” (laughs) ...

MLW: Can you briefly describe the different characters of the silver and the golden flute by giving us a picture?

KHS: Silver produces a bright sound – like a terrific muscatel vine – and Gold produces a velvet sound – like a sun-ripened Blaufraenkischer Burgenlaender (Blue Frankish vine from the Austrian Burgenland region) ... (laughs) ... At home playing the golden and the silver flute alternatively is a good way to grasp the contrast and the specific character of each of the materials. It’s a process of continuous learning! ...

MLW: Would you say that flutes today are somewhat lacking an individual character of sound?

KHS: No! I don’t live in the past, but now. Globally seen the art of flute making has an universal story, starting for the modern western concert flute with the type that Theodor Boehm developed in the mid of the 19th century. Actually, we have a paradisiacal situation: the standard of flute making is nowadays globally extremely high and flutists can chose from as wide a spectrum of brands as never before, so who would not find his or her brand new instrument that fits perfectly!? Besides, there are still instruments from “yesterday” which will still work ... so just look and you’ll find!

MLW: How does the flute section contribute the special sound of the orchestra?

KHS: We comprehend ourselves as part of the whole, and won’t show off with our “flutists’ egos” ... (laughs). Except when the flute is taking over, or when the flute as leading voice is covering everything so to speak. The Vienna Philharmonic will always expect the “connectional” in your playing, it’s a basic requirement that you can mix with the others. It’s

also said that our string players “play with a lot of soul on their fingerboards”. This has great impact on the flutes who often play together with the first violins and tonally merge with them.

MLW: When you chose your instruments do you take into account also acoustic circumstances like the peculiarities of the big hall of the Musikverein?

KHS: Yes, you just need to tip the big hall acoustically and the sound will float throughout the hall. You’d be ill-advised to use a smooth and sharp “Yelling flute”. On the other side you need to draw contours and offer substance, because it’s such a big hall! This venue will teach you a lot, it’s a huge musical instrument in itself!

MLW: You’ve won the Carl Nielsen flute competition as well as the flute competition in Kakov – naturally these were great personal successes. I remember the famous German actress Iris Berben admitting once that she never took part in a competition because of stage-fright. She made a fantastic career nevertheless ...

KHS: I don’t think you should negate the situation “competition” completely. It’s rather a question of how you deal with it. The enormous preparation needed for a competition can become an important engine to speed on in your personal development and to do many different experiences. Back then I was driven by my great desire to play my beloved Nielsen concerto with an orchestra; that was a gift to me! In addition with the first prize it made me walk on air at that time!

MLW: Presently the label ambitus offers Eva Amsler’s duets by Wilhelm Friedemann Bach, whereas your CD “Flute Perspectives” with music from Hummel to Boulez is sold out. Any new CD projects?

KHS: Actually, I’ve been quite busy in this area lately and some new releases are going to take place: e.g. Concerti Grossi of the 20th century (by Schulhoff, Krenek, d’Indy) with the Academy of St. Martins in the Fields, Maria Prinz and Sir Neill Marriner, which will be released by Chandos in October 2013. With my colleague Walter Auer I have recorded all duets by Doppler, that will be released by Tudor. The Dopplers were in a way our predecessors in the orchestra. I’ve also made a recording of my own arrangements of sonatas by Johannes Brahms and more pieces by or connected to Prokofiev, we’re in the post-production with it. Preiser Records offers my recording of Villa Lobos’ “Jet whistle”, a version of “Bachianas no. 5” with the cellists of the Vienna Philharmonics and finally the double concerto for Bassoon and Flute by Telemann with Dimitrij Kitajenko and the Vienna Concertino.

MLW: Which innovative options do you see for yourself when doing a recording?

KHS: Recording a piece of music means conserving it, doing a fixation of a certain moment: it can never replace the sensation of hearing it live. Nevertheless, naturally I try to put as much spontaneity into it as possible. That’s always a huge challenge, with all the perfection demanded by microphone and technique. Sometimes, however, the technologies offered nowadays can lead to really innovative results. I’ve recently recorded Mozart’s concerto in G major and CPE Bach’s concerto in d minor for VSPA (“Vienna Symphonic Play Along”).

MLW: Which advantages will this new technology offer in comparison with the traditional CD?

KHS: It’s a novelty in regards to using computer based technology for studying the pieces: it’s a multi-media experience of these two important concertos.

MLW: I’m very much looking forward to that. The high tech remolding of the MMO concept by Vienna Symphonic Plays Along found a very positive media resonance for their presentation at the music convention in Frankfurt. The readers of Floete aktuell and I are wishing you all the best for your future plans and want to thank you for this conversation.