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A Singing Hiker Who Scales the Heights of Mozart Opera

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SALZBURG, Austria - Standing in the Barmstein mountains, not far from Salzburg, I am listening to a fourth-generation Salzburger sing [Mozart](#) in the woods. It is not exactly on a scale with next year's plans to celebrate the 250th anniversary of the birth of Mozart, this city's most famous native son. Those events will dominate the musical life of Salzburg and Vienna. Mozart's complete operas are to be performed at next summer's Salzburg Festival; Robert Wilson is designing what is bound to be a strange installation in the building where Mozart was born; multiday Mozart biking tours are planned for those who want to follow in his coach tracks; musicians will make pilgrimages to perform and audiences to listen.

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But a few may come on this eccentric pilgrimage, as they have for a decade. Just off a hiker's path, the tenor Werner Ruttinger, a graduate of the town's venerable Mozarteum, is standing with a backpack that contains a brass megaphone along with professional climbing equipment, preparing to hike 200 meters up to a rock face from which he will sing. First, though, a portable speaker plays the synthesized accompaniment prepared by his wife and collaborator, Christina Ruttinger, and he begins Tamino's aria, "Dies Bildnis," from "The Magic Flute."

But he is not impersonating a prince enchanted by the image of Pamina. Instead, Mr. Ruttinger, with almost boyish whimsy, poses as a theater manager whose loving gaze is inspired more by the prospects of filled coffers than by his star's beauty. "She is my vending machine," he sings in falsetto. The music is the sound of Mozart; the sarcasm is the sound of Mr. Ruttinger. And when he sings Papageno's famous introductory aria, the tenor laden with thick ropes and carabiners could almost be a bird catcher but for the cynical lyrics that turn an innocent song into a sneer. "Mozart's paradise," the aria calls Salzburg - a paradise shaped by "bankers' ice."



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Mr. Ruttinger ordinarily performs his quirky version of Mozart in Salzburg itself, jabbing at the very world from which he seeks to lure his listeners. His pied piping typically leads them along the edge of the town's rock-mountain, the Monchsberg as he juggles bitterness, mockery and self-mockery in fractured English lyrics (at the mountainous price of 540 euros a performance). He uses Schubert's "Winterreise" to similar effect, performing these wintry songs in season and on location, so to speak, using a breath-warming machine he invented to preserve his lungs, as he sardonically comments on the wintry state of culture in Salzburg.

His are not unfamiliar attitudes, of course; attacks on provinciality and commercialism are the typical coinage of the avant-garde. Mr. Ruttinger, who calls himself a "voice from the abyss," is really a kind of performance artist. (See www.naturfestspiele.at/englisch/e-index.htm.) When he performs his own music on mountain tops, he sings into both a megaphone and a microphone, the signals arriving at listeners below in staggered counterpoint. But the attitude intrigues: whimsy is built into his snarls, and gentle absurdity into his apparatus. He reflects a type of Salzburgian style, mixing charm and gibe, jest and outrage, that can (in its minor fashion) become an oblique tribute to Mozart himself.

For make no mistake: despite the continuing seductions of Salzburg, in which the Italian and Germanic Baroques gently intertwine, Mozart had no more affection for his native town than Mr. Ruttinger does. In many respects, Mozart too was an avant-gardist, though a transcendental one.

Mozart, for example, bristled at court service, just as his father, Leopold, had. When Leopold led the prodigy on tours of the European capitals, he was hoping to expand their options. Mozart learned more than music from his father. "How I detest Salzburg," he wrote in 1778, "and not only on account of the injustices which my dear father and I have endured there." "When I play or when any of my compositions are performed," Mozart wrote of Salzburg, "it is just as if the audience were all tables and chairs." It is, he concluded, "no place for my talent."

Mozart also kept testing the limits of conventional patronage. "If you will not serve me properly, clear out," the Archbishop of Salzburg once told him; with acid condescension, he suggested that Mozart enroll in a Naples conservatory. In Vienna in 1781, Mozart provoked a quarrel with the archbishop that led to a shouting match. "Even if I had to go begging," Mozart wrote to his father, "I would never again serve such a lord."

But at least in part, the judgment against Salzburg was exaggerated: the young composer's pieces that had their premieres there are stupefyingly rich; not all his listeners were deaf to their virtues. Mozart may have been the first pan-European composer, but he was also very much a Salzburger and relished provoking his hometown. He once planned a libretto, perhaps for a domestic performance, "Der Salzburger Lump in Wien" - "The Scamp From Salzburg, in Vienna." Its hero would have bristled with mischievous barbs; his name was Herr Stachelschwein - Mr. Porcupine.

In fact, Mozart's music used the stately regularities of court style as a frame of reference

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in which his rebellions took place, testing constraints, probing possibilities. Mozart was perhaps the first major composer to adopt the life of a freelance. Think of a 25-year-old, who had spent his entire life guided by either his father or the court, cut loose in Vienna, without any guarantees other than his genius. It might have been enough to turn him into a performance artist. Instead it gave us Figaro.

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