

If one is to believe the common descriptions of Will Benedict's works, their predominant motif is that of the "picture in the picture". Gouache on canvas paintings are embedded in hard foam panels, which are in turn painted or unpainted, life-size cut-out studio portraits are (sometimes) applied and set in aluminium and glass frames. This leads to hybrid structures that make use of just about everything two-dimensional art has to offer: painting, drawing, photography, collage. Even though Benedict's pictures are based on the method of collage, they do not aim at fragmenting the picture, but on the contrary appear surprisingly homogeneous. While previous exhibitions have been dedicated to the various conventions embedded in global tourism the exhibition at Balice Hertling attempts to create a corporate abattoir. A repertoire of pictures, a new series of furniture like objects which emit sound made in collaboration with Sergei Tcherepnin and a sculptural wall painting called Flat Black Europe by Eric Wesley make up the essential content of the exhibition, a starting point from which a sequence of shifts and disentanglements takes place.

## THE VIENNA FIXATION

"Tradition ist Schlamperei," Gustav Mahler liked to say—"Tradition is sloppiness." When Mahler took charge of the Vienna Court Opera, in 1897, he resolved to banish bad habits that had encrusted that institution. The city of Mozart, Beethoven, and Schubert has long cherished the belief that music is native to its air, that a certain sound and sensibility can flourish only in its climate. In Mahler's day, the Vienna Philharmonic, the élite ensemble associated with the Court (later the State) Opera, already prided itself on its painterly approach to sonority, on its shimmering strings and golden horns. Mahler, the scourge from the provinces, shook things up. His Beethoven Ninth was described as a "triumph of lucidity," and caused unease for that very reason: critics found it too precisely delineated, too nervously driven. Mahler left the opera ten years later, exhausted by his struggle with a mentality that seemed to enshrine and embalm music in equal measure.

In recent weeks, the Vienna Philharmonic and other forces from the Vienna State Opera have taken up residence at Carnegie Hall, heading a festival called "Vienna: City of Dreams." A semblance of the Vienna sound unquestionably remains, even if it has faded with time. One passage toward the end of the Adagio of Bruckner's Sixth Symphony was emblematic: violins and cellos glided variously downward and upward in stepwise motion while flutes and a clarinet sustained shining but never piercing tones. It was a texture so palpably plush that you felt as if you were sinking into a pillow-top mattress at the Hotel Imperial. Yet the first three concerts in the series—all of which were led by Franz Welser-Möst, the Vienna State Opera's music director—dwelled on surface sensuousness at the expense of structural logic and expressive vigor.

*Schlamperei* may not be the right word. Smugness, perhaps—an expectation that concertgoers should pay hundreds of dollars to witness a beautiful routine. Self-satisfaction has been at the root of other problems at the Philharmonic in recent years: a failure to deal adequately with its Nazi past (last year, the orchestra found itself in the awkward position of very belatedly revoking an honor that had been given to Baldur von Schirach, the leader of the Hitler Youth); its reluctance to engage female musicians (the first was hired in 1997, and there are now seven tenured women); its nearly all-white personnel. Tradition is often cited as the reason for the extreme gradualism of the Philharmonic's evolution. It may be, though, that its lack of diversity has sapped the very sound that it aims to preserve. Without vitality, all that beauty decays into kitsch.

What is it like to be a composer today in the City of Dreams? A panel discussion with Olga Neuwirth, Bernhard Gander, and Pierluigi Billone, at the Austrian Cultural Forum, was commendably free of cant. Neuwirth described her love-hate relationship with Vienna, mentioned the vagaries of Austrian politics, and joked that “Vienna Complex” could be understood in a Freudian sense. Billone, on the other hand, said that the city had given him “the chance to survive as a composer.” I had fun picturing a panel discussion with Mahler, Schoenberg, and Berg: the conversation might have sounded much the same.

(Alex Ross)

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