

OPERETTA IN AUSTRIA

Review by Yehuda Shapiro

Say the words 'Austria' and 'Festival' to an opera-lover, and the immediate response will be 'Salzburg' or at a pinch 'Bregenz'. However, the Central European summer also brings a major outbreak of operetta...in Vienna, in the capital itself, it's the theatre in the palace of Schönbrunn.

The strategically named MUSIK THEATER SCHÖNBRUNN was launched in 2005 by impresario Martin Turba, formerly at Bad Ischl, who made his name on the management team of the famous Schubertiade founded in Hohenems. The exquisite auditorium, first opened in 1747, holds just over 300 people; it was renovated in 1809 by Napoleon, who was occupying the palace at the time. Appropriately enough, Turba's first production was *Wiener Blut*, set during the Congress of Vienna in 1814-15...

The first night's lady, Ingrid Habermann, is an exponent of *La voix humaine*, *Pierrot Lunaire* and *Powder Her Face*, but she also has impeccable credentials in the lighter muse. She made a stylish, feisty and musically scrupulous Rosalinde in a zappy modern-dress production by singer-director Volker Vogel. He compensated for a limited budget (currently the company receives no state or city funding) with an incisive, streetwise approach that did not flinch from exposing the work's cynical heart. The tenor Eisenstein, Michael Heim (a pupil of Gedda and Araiza) was a dangerous hybrid of suave man about town and spoiled, horny schoolboy, while Bavarian baritone Marcus Niedermeyr (favoured by conductors like Savall, Rilling and Koopman) made a coolly manipulative Falke. With deliciously pearly coloratura and *chutzpah* to spare, the Adele of the young Polish soprano Anna Siminska was a housemaid unlikely to remain below stairs for long. Christa Ratzenböck made Orlofsky personable rather than grotesque, Valeriy Serkin was a dark-voiced, virile Alfred and Götz Kauffmann, a local star of stage and screen, did not overdo Frosch's drunken antics - though his authentic *wienerisch* whine and topical gags proved pretty impenetrable to this out-of-towner. Setting the seal on the evening was the conducting of octogenarian Herbert Mogg. From his small orchestra of young players he drew the kind of phrasing and unforced *Schwung* that come from having operetta in your (Vienna) blood.