

ALS OB...

After the novel by Charles Lewinsky
Music and songs in the Ghetto of Theresienstadt

STAGE DIRECTION AND SCENOGRAPHY STEPHAN GRÖGLER

with Gaëlle Mechaly soprano
& I SOLISTI ensemble

Played on
« Violins of Hope »
Amnon Weinstein



*'They lived for nothing but music. It was their food.
Had they not come to listen to us, they would have died long before'*
Alice Sommer-Herz, survivor of the Terezin camp



Production | SALONISTI & OPERACT

Organized from 1941 on as a 'model ghetto' by the nazis, Theresienstadt detained a great number of key figures of the European cultural life. Despite the appalling conditions of life in the camp, a high standard musical activity was organized, giving hope to the prisoners. The six characters of the show, like their models in Terezin, are composers, performers, instrumentalists and singers. The story tells us about their encounter inside the camp, their friendship and the solace they are seeking in the music. The repertoire, from classical music to jazz, echoes the emotional meandering of the prisoners from hope to renouncement, boldness to black humour, as is expressed in the song 'als ob' after which the production is named.

operact

Als ob...

After the novel "Gerron"
by Charles Lewinsky

With songs and music by :

Ilse Weber

Viktor Ullman

Karel Svenk

Karel Berman

Edwin Shulhoff

Hans Kràsa

Robert Dauber

Leo Strauss

Sung in German, Czek, Yiddish,
French, with English-surtitles

Spoken testimonies by :

Liselotte Guenzler

Alice Sommer-Herz

Max Manheimer

Esther Bauer

Eva de Vries



ALS OB . . . a true story

Theresienstadt (Terezín in Czech), which from November 1941 onwards the Nazis converted into a “model ghetto”, was the detention camp for many leading figures in European cultural life. In spite of the atrocious living conditions, the constant threat of deportation, musical activities of great quality developed there, in which every musical genre was present: from classical music to jazz, from instrumental music to opera, not forgetting oratorio and cabaret. When they discovered these clandestine concerts, the Nazis chose to tolerate them. Highly original works saw the light of day in this context, though they were very quickly snapped up by the criminal Nazi propaganda machine.

In a fabricated décor, with its fake shops and cafés and forced smiles, the cultural life of Theresienstadt was in effect staged by the commander of the SS camp (Stadtverschönerungsprogramm = Town beautification programme), so that the camp would appear to be a model Jewish town, in the image of the spas of Karlsbad and Marienbad. Thus Theresienstadt became the showcase that was meant to prove to the world that its “residents” were living well there: in June 1944, the Nazis even went so far as to authorize a visit from inspectors from the Red Cross. There was even a propaganda film shot on site, under the direction of the German Jewish film-maker Kurt Geron, who was then sent to his death at Auschwitz. The rushes of this film that have been found bear witness to this appalling comedy.

At the same time however, music gave a bit of hope to the prisoners. “Music is magic. We played in front of a desperate audience, ill and starving. They lived for this music; it was like food to them. If they hadn’t come to listen to us they would, like us, have been dead long since”, recalls the Czech pianist Alice Sommer-Herz, a survivor from the concentration camp.

Of the 141,000 prisoners at Theresienstadt, only 23,000 survived. Among those who perished were several composers and musicians who were cruelly reduced to silence, worn down by the privations and the tortures they endured, before finally dying physically in the gas chambers at Auschwitz.

The project “als ob...” aims to give voice to those artists whose amazing zest for life brought a little humanity to the ghetto. Through their works this humanity still comes down to us today and urges us never to forget.

CAST

Installation-show

Duration: 1.30 hrs without interval

Music by :

*Ise Weber, Viktor Ullman, Karel Svenk,
Karel Berman, Edwin Shulhoff, Hans
Krása, Robert Dauber, Leo Strauss.
Sung in German, Czek, Yiddish, French,
with english-surtitles*

With :

*Gaëlle Méchaly, soprano
I SALONISTI*

*Piotr Plawner, violin
Lorenz Hasler, viola & violin
OrlandoTheuler, cello
Béla Szedlák, double bass
Gerardo Vila, piano*

Extr. from the speech of

Paul Epstein :

Uwe Schoenbeck, actor

Musicals Arrangements :

*Jiří Ottokar Růžička
John Glenesk Mortimer
Boldizsár Csíky
György Mondvay*

Spoken testimonies by :

*Liselotte Guenzler, Esther Bauer
Max Manheimer, Erna de Vries
Alice Sommer-Herz*

Sound effects and recordings :

*Séverine Lathuillière-Pinkasfeld
(Naia Productions)*

Stage direction

lights and scenography :
Stephan Grögler

Setting realisation :

*Lukas Hasler
Costume :
Véronique Seymat, Patricia Flaget*

Production

OPERACT -
ISALONISTI
(Sabine + Lorenz Hasler)

With the support of :



La Fondation du Judaïsme Français

Performances

*Since its creation « als ob... » has received
very touching and stirring response : one
should mention the involved response of
young audiences.*

Premiere Bern PROGR (CH) 2015

Reithalle Bern (CH) 2016

Schlosskonzerte Thun (CH) 2016

Avignon Opéra (F) 2018

Coming up :

2020 Camp Westerbork Holland

2020 Camp des Milles Aix en Provence (F)



Interview with Stephan Grögler, director and set designer

What made you choose to put on “als ob...”?

When I became aware of this very dark episode of history it seemed to me that it was quite simply my responsibility to give voice to these musicians. What has come down to us from them also speaks for the immense power of music. For me it is not enough that this music be treated merely as a consumable cultural product; it is above all a source of life, and I believe in its unifying power

How did you go about devising this project?

Fully aware of the several difficulties inherent in it; and first of all, how would it be possible to describe or speak of the unimaginable? This is a subject that also raises the question of the ambivalence of art, since this music was at one and the same time vital to the prisoners, and used by the Nazis for propaganda. It is an immense challenge to do justice to this moment in history and to this almost unique musical repertoire.

A challenge that questions the responsibility of the artist?

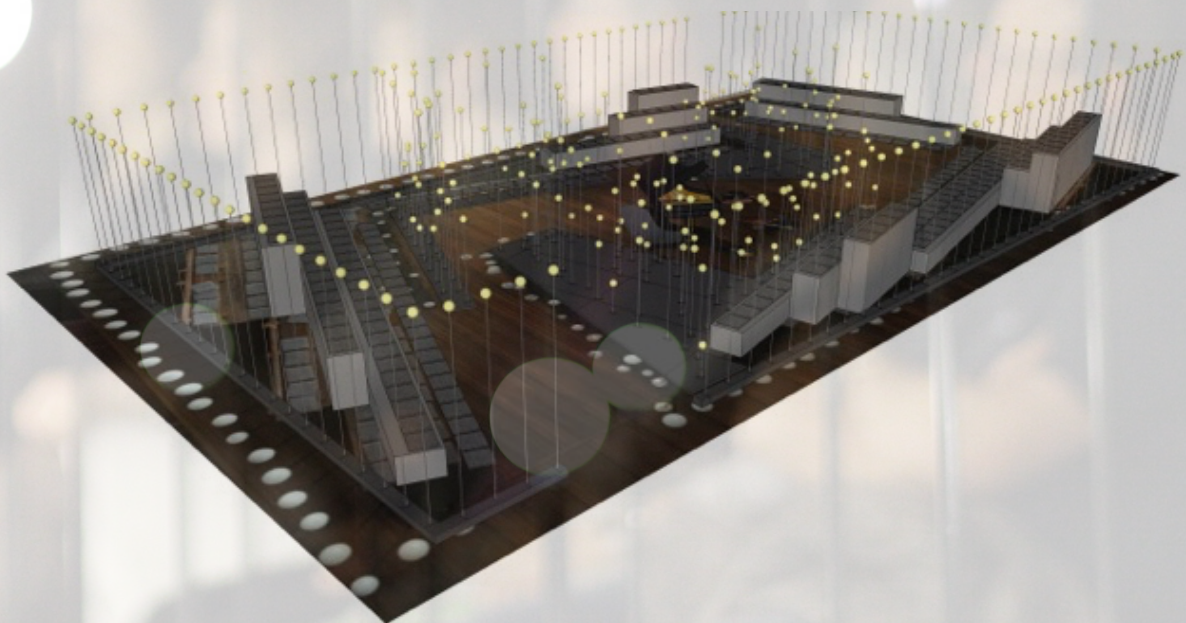
Of course, as exemplified by the film-maker Kurt Geron: although fully aware of being exploited, he fabricated an illusion that he almost ended up believing in himself. While shooting the film he shared this chimeric hope with his fellow inmates, whether participants or spectators, but all, like him, condemned to death

Is “als ob...” a show about the working of memory?

Yes, I wanted to bring this episode of history up-to-date. It seemed to me that our approach to the subject had to be entirely based on real-life experience, in a world that is becoming more and more sterilized. Who was better placed to talk about Terezín than the prisoners themselves? For this I had two sorts of material to work with: recorded interviews with survivors once the war was over, and the musical scores left by the musicians of the camp before they were deported and met their tragic end in the gas chambers of Auschwitz. So, with Lorenz Hasler we developed a musical framework that is punctuated by sound recordings of the survivors, which anchor the show in its historical reality.

A few words on the staging?

I made the choice of having the audience right in the middle of the performing area; the spectators are well and truly actors in the show, in the sense that they are incited to live it from within, which gives them a certain sensation of confinement. The stage is effectively in the shape of a broken swastika bordered with hundreds of metal rods illuminated by little LED lamps. These lights are like fireflies that glow in the night, but also like souls whose brightness shines before they are extinguished.





Research, restoration and musicals arrangements

by Lorenz Hasler (artistic director of I Salonisti)

I SALONISTI has researched the repertoire very thoroughly. With the cooperation of the Paul Sacher Foundation, the Czech Museum of Music, Prague, and the Concentus Moraviae, photocopies of these original compositions were made available to us, from which we made a selection. In Terezín every musical genre was present. It was important to bring out the full diversity of the music while at the same time respecting the specific criteria of our ensemble. The programme “als ob...” is an original creation: most of the works as they are heard in this programme have never been performed before in this form. Among the surviving manuscripts that came down to us, often there remained no more than one section of the work, which was then reconstructed by our arrangers and composers with whom we have collaborated for some years now: Jiří Ottokar Růžička, John Glenesk Mortimer, Boldizsár Csíky, György Mondvay. The other, published works are played in their original form for solo violin, piano solo, string trio, soprano-violin-piano.

” Music, was life ”

by Gaëlle Méchal, soprano:

“Music, music was life”, as Hans Krasa has one of the characters say in his opera “Brundibar” that was composed in Terezín. Singing played a significant part in artistic creativity in Theresienstadt. To sing was to resist, to give courage and hope to one’s fellow-prisoners, as is attested by the song composed in Terezín by Karel Švenk, which became the camp’s hymn: “Do not lament, let us hold each other by the hand; one day we shall walk together on the ruins of the ghetto.” To sing was to forget for a moment the reality of imprisonment, the humiliation and the terror; but it was also a way of bearing witness to the horror, in order to denounce it all the more powerfully, as in Ilse Weber’s poignant song “Ich wandre durch Theresienstadt”. For me, singing this repertoire today is like giving my voice to those who were silenced. Now that practically all of the survivors of the camps are no longer with us, it is up to us, performing artists, to pass on their story. This duty towards justice and memory is a new obligation that all of us must feel: so that this can never happen again.



PRESS

How to represent art in hell? Stephan Grögler has met this impossible challenge. The audience is struck, shattered, sometimes carried away. The violence is never displayed, it is just suggested, its imprint all the deeper...

Instead of a sudden shock, we are encouraged to think and feel all the intrinsic beauty of this music. This is surely the most beautiful tribute that « us » the post-war generations can give to the victims of the Nazi regime...

The most astonishing thing about this evening is the total symbiosis that exists between Gaëlle Méchaly, who has a strong personality, and I Salonisti, this ensemble that has been formed for so many years, a communion that they have acquired during rehearsals but also thanks to their artistic maturity that allows this unity on stage.
François Lilienfeldt Ensuite, Zeitschrift zu Kultur und Kunst

Lorenz Hasler and his ensemble with the enchanting soprano Gaëlle Méchaly performed with a high sensitivity . . . subtly selected and arranged repertoire.
Berner Zeitung

An ambitious programm ... The space seems want to tell more than the twilight reveals. Even if one sits as a spectator passively in the dark periphery of the bright island, one is in the middle of it. Instead of names here there are sounds. Upwards instead of gravestones anonymous lamp ball bars. Kind of will-o' the wisp in the darkness; it is a garden without Eden.
Der Bund

A 90-minute program that gets under your skin. It's incredibly deep, this particular atmosphere. . . says a spectator. And a woman adds It was beautiful. I was very agitated, I almost had tears
Swiss Radio - Regional News

Gaëlle Méchaly plays the role inimitably. The depth and diversity of the emotional expressions she depicts is indescribable. An incredible voice capable of modulation, from outcry to the most breathy pianissimo in the concluding lullaby, from folk song to art song.
François Lilienfeldt Ensuite, Zeitschrift zu Kultur und Kunst





« Violins of Hope » of Amnon Weinstein

Amnon Weinstein made it his noble mission to perpetuate the memory of the deportees by means of the violins which he restores. Those instruments belonged to the victims or survivors of the Shoah. Bringing them back to life through concerts all over the world is exceptionally moving.

For the upcoming tour operAct teams up with « Violins of Hope » of Amnon Weinstein. The collaboration makes it possible for the musicians to play the instruments of his collection. This can be combined with a conference about the extraordinary history or/and an exhibition of these instruments.

Around the performance

operAct proposes various activities that can be added to the performance.

+ these programmes could include

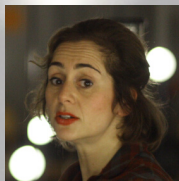
- Lecture by Charles Lewinsky of his novel "Gerron"
- Showing of the propaganda film by Kurt Gerron
- Exhibition and lecture about « Violins of Hope »
- Pupils being involved in the presentation of the opera « Brundibar » from Theresienstadt

+ around the performance:



Gaëlle Méchal, soprano

Born in Marseille (French-Swiss nationality) she studied music at the National Conservatory of her hometown in piano and singing class. She distinguishes herself by the diversity of her repertoire, and jump with ease from baroque opera (Atys, King Arthur) to opera repertoire (L'Enfant et les Sortilèges, Carmen, Freischütz) from musical (Johnny Johnson, West side Story) to contemporary music (The Tempest Book Kahia Sarahiao, L'Amour Coupable by Thierry Pécou) or film music. She sang on the biggest opera stages (BAM New York, Paris Opera, Scala di Milano, Teatro alla Fenice) in productions by Alfredo Arias, Hugo de Ana, Pier Luigi Pizzi, Adrien Noble, Andrei Serban under the direction of Riccardo Muti, William Christie, Isaac Karabtchevsky, Friedeman Layer, Yoram David, Hervé Niquet. Her discography includes several recordings of complete operas and DVDs. For several years she has collaborated with film music composers: Gabriel Yared, Michel Legrand, Patrick Doyle, Mickaël Giacchino. She is regularly invited to perform their compositions in prestigious celebrations such as the European Films Academy Awards in Berlin, Grand Rex Paris, World Soundtracks Ghent, Munich Film Festival. She has composed melodies for the soundtracks of the films: La Boite Noire (Richard Berry), recorded for films as : Taken (Liam Neeson), Dorothy, for Wong Kar Wai latest film: See you Tomorrow... Since 2011 she is a member of the operAct Company.



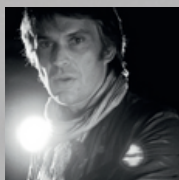
I SALONISTI

The group I SALONISTI has been performing since in 1981. In the past 34 years the group has played its wide-ranging program with great success at home and abroad. The group's trademarks are the exploration of the most varied musical worlds on the one hand and the enormous engagement and energy of their interpretation on the other. The five musicians' openness and the delight in discovery is evident in their concert programs. I SALONISTI dedicate themselves to familiar works with the same passion and care as they do to the unknown, to serious as much as to humorous and to 'listener-friendly' pieces as much as to more challenging ones.

The concerts venues in which I SALONISTI have performed include: Internationale Musikfestwochen Luzern, Schleswig-Holstein Musik Festival, Festival Estival de Paris, World Exhibition Sevilla, La Fenice Venedig, Wigmore Hall London, Santory Hall Tokyo.

Recordings I SALONISTI recorded a wide range of repertoire with EMI, Harmonia Mundi, Decca and Sony: film music, Latin-American music, music from opera and operetta, tango, salon music, gypsy music. Two of their recordings, Orient-Express and Transatlantic, have been awarded the «grand prix du disque» (Académie Charles Cros).

Engaged by 20th Century Fox as the ship's orchestra in the film «Titanic», directed by James Cameron in 1997, I SALONISTI enjoyed the new experience of both performing the incidental music and, as actors, portraying the Titanic musicians in the film.



Stephan Grögler, Staging, spatial concept and set design

"His theatre spectacles are characterized by their inventiveness, their sense of theatrical image and the human precision in his directing"

Theaterlexikon Schweiz Alain Perroux)

Born in Bern, Stephan Grögler studied music (violin) before joining the « Hochschule » in Vienna to study opera directing. In 1995-98 he was appointed director in residence at the Opéra National de Lyon. From then on, he signed his own productions and sets:

La Bohème, La Traviata, La Sonnambula, Don Pasquale, Cenerentola, Tancredi, La Cambiale di Matrimonio, Il Barbiere di Seviglia, Le Nozze di Figaro, La Finta Giardiniera, L'Anima del Filosofo, Der Zwerg, Der Kaiser von Atlantis, Herzog Blaubart, The Beggar's Opera, The Rape of Lucretia, The Turn of The Screw , Samson et Dalila, Cendrillon, Roland, Die Lustige Wittwe, Orphé aux Enfers, Die Dreigroschenoper ... for prestigious performing venues such as the Santa Fe Festival USA, Teatro Comunale di Bologna, Bari, Lecce, San Carlos di Napoli, la Monnaie de Bruxelles, Le Grand Théâtre de Genève, l'Opéra-Comique de Paris et l'Opéra de Versailles, Le Grand Théâtre du Luxembourg, l'Opéra National de Lyon et Nancy, l'Opéra de Marseille, Montpellier, Avignon, Caen, Dublin et de Jerez, Valencia, in the Künstlerhaus Wien, Landestheater Salzburg, Marinskj St Petersburg, Bayrische Staatsoper, Wiener Staatsoper, Opéra National d'Athènes, NCPA Beijing, ... and with artists like : Nathalie Dessay, Julia Migenes, Patrizia Ciofi, Roberto Alagna , Christophe Rousset, Antonio Florio, Valery Gergiev, Karl Lagerfeld, Fernando Botero.

His commitment in contemporary music leads him to create: Die Weisse Rose by Udo Zimmermann, Das Kalte Herz by Simon Ho on a libretto by Lukas Hartmann, La Mort de Socrate by Gracianne Finzi on a libretto by Jean-Claude Carrière, Eight Songs for à Mad King and Miss Donnithornes Maggot by Peter Maxwell Davies, Exercices de Conversation by José Evangelista to texts by Ionesco, two operas by Pascal Dusapin Niobé and Medeamaterial, and operas by François Cattin: ... and if Bacon, Gulliver, Les Aveugles.

Very involved in training of young singers, he has produced several productions in partnership with the Paris Bastille National Opera, the Beijing National Opera, the Ambronaye Abbey, the Geneva University of Music, the Lausanne Conservatory, the Royaumont Foundation, the Lyon National Opera, the Grand Théâtre de Genève, the Festival d'Aix en Provence, Pavia, Fribourg, Bern, Sion, Brig and several projects with the young Opéra Compagnie (La Chau-de-Fonds) in Switzerland.

In 2010, he founded operAct, Stephan Grögler is also often asked by the Marcadé agency to collaborate in the staging of shows for their events for major houses such as Van Clef & Arpels, the Cartier house in Paris, New York, Vienna, Geneva or Los Angeles... (fashion show, presentation of new collections. . .) but also for the Principality of Monaco the famous: Bal de La Rose. He worked with artists like: Lambert Wilson, Carla Bruni, Naomi Campbell, Shirley Bassey, Marianne Faithfull, Jane Birkin, Nicole Croisille, Patrick Poivre d'Arvor, Charles Berling. . .

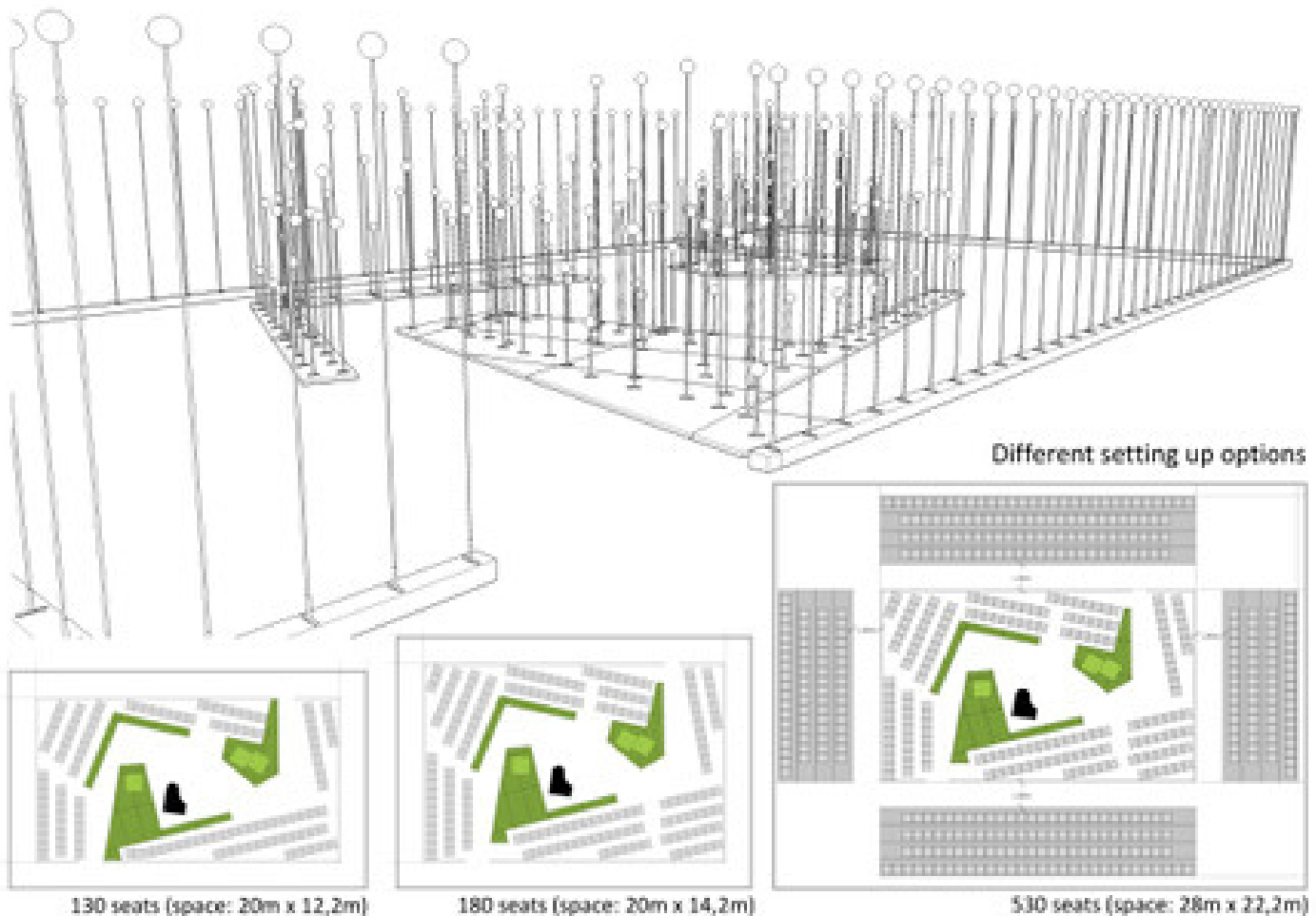
Soon he will be performing the premiere at the Beijing National Opera NCPA of « Snowwhite » children's opera in Chinese and the revival of « Les Contes d'Hoffmann » with Pinchas Steinberg also at the NCPA. He is also preparing the operAct production of « 3 Opérettes » for a tour in Switzerland and France, the creation of « Monstres » by Alexandros Markeas and Pierre Senges and with the french cinéma actor Dominique Pinon, "Le Magnifique" a baroque opera from Grétry in collaboration with the french Orchestra Les Monts du Reuil and the NY Designer Jeniffer Crupi and "die lustige Wittwe" from Lehar for an open-air Festival in Schloss Tabor in Austria. He will also premier « The White Rose » from Zimmermann for the Semperopera in Dresden.

Implementation- Ideal room

- The unique scenic layout for each performance space becomes an autonomous object - sculpture - theatrical space that can be set up in any location, without the need for theatre equipment.
- Obligation to darken.
- Installation 2 services minimum.
- on tour : 6 artists on stage + 3 backstage
- volume 9m³
- Technical data sheet available on request

For further information see the pdf on the homepage of www.operact.eu

- Als ob...VIMEO on : <https://vimeo.com/161952506>



operact

Production contact
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www.operact.eu

operAct aims at the creation and distribution of live productions.

Its main ambition is to devise all-encompassing projects and associating contemporary artists from every artistic sphere (music, design, cinema, graphic arts, fashion, etc.).

It also intends to transform and renew the relationship between the lyrical art and its audience by conceiving productions half-way between the opera and the contemporary art installations, where inventiveness and technology conspire to support musical projects for reduced number of performers, which assures more versatility. An itinerant troupe gathered around a strong common artistic project must be able to perform in unexpected locations. Last, operAct aims at offering an encounter between the classical repertoire and subjects broaching on the present state of our modern world.

Conjugating opera in the present time having carte blanche, such is operAct's aspiration.

Associated artists and partners:

Julia Migenes, Roy Krejberg, Nathalie Dessay, Daan Roosegaarde, Stéphanie Marin (Smarin), Thierry Pécou - Ensemble Variances, Nicolas Farine, Jeune Opéra Compagnie, Global Swiss Orchestra, Charles Carcopino, International Fashion Academy Paris, Charles Lewinsky, Olivier Gluzman - Les Visiteurs du Soir, Armando Noguerra, Gaëlle Méchaly, Elizabeth Bailey, I Salonisti, Ezequiel Spucches, Martyn Jacques, The Tiger Lillies, Arne Quinze, Alexandros Markéas, Didier Puntos, Jesper Kongshaug, Véronique Seymat, Séverine Lathuilière, Philippe Aigle - Naia production, groupedunes, Sarah Ford - Quatenaire, Marthe Lemuth - or not production, Thomas Vingtrinier - Studio Sequenza, Eric Jiroux - Victorie Music ect.

operAct productions on stage:

Pierrot Lunar Cabaret 30 (Julia Migenes)

Magic spells and phials a lyric extravaganza for the use of children (CD harmonia mundi - book&CD with Nathalie Dessay ed. Braques)

Als ob ... music and songs in the camp of Theresienstadt with the Ensemble I SALONISTI

Songs from the Gutter, a Tribute to Edith Piaf with the band **The Tiger Lillies**

Sefarad's ancestral songs revisited by Thierry Pécou and Variance Ensemble

KØUPLES 3 domestic opera, a ludicrous lyrical trilogy about conjugal life

Die Weisse Rose, die Lezten Tage von Sophie und Hans Sholl, opera von Udo Zimmermann

In Arsenal Metz, Nancy National Opera, Lyon National Opera, Paris Bastille Amphitheater, Bordeaux Opera, TPR in La Chaux de Fonds (CH), Reithalle in Bern (CH), Reims Opera, Town Hall Paris, Mouffetard Theater Paris, Dijon Opera, Manufacture in Nancy, Music Centre in Nanterre, St-Quentin en Yvelines Theatre, Arc en Scènes Theatre, Anthéa Theater Antibes, Abbey of Noirlac, the Garonne Theater, Arabesque Festival Hamburg (D), Angers-Nantes Opera, Theatre in Caen, Imperial Theatre in Compiègne, Eclats de Voix Festival in Auch, AULA-Progr in Bern (CH), Cassel of Thune festival (CH), Opera in Tours, Cratère Alès, Kidzic festival in Louvain-la Neuve (B), Ambronay festival, Théâtre de Vanves, MC Bourges, La Barcarolle St-Omer, Théâtre Valère (CH), Sion Casino Théâtre de Rolle (CH) Maison des Arts Thonon-Evian, Dôme Théâtre Albertville, Theater in Jorat Mézière (CH)...

Upcoming projects for 2020-21:

- Our production of "Die Weisse Rose" (Zimmermann) will be part of the repertory of the Semper Oper Dresde opening 9. October 2020.
- André Grétry "Le Magnifique" with the Baroc Ensemble "Les Monts du Reuil" and the Newyorker Designer Jeniffer Crupi opening January 2021 in Reims opera
- "Monstres" world première (Alexandros Markeas and Pierre Senges) with the famous french film actor Dominique Pinon February 2021
- "Three operettas" Three European operetta cultures in one evening

