

(Kritik für Johann Strauss Society of Great Britain/Newsletter)

SCHRAMMEL FEST DRAWS THOUSANDS TO LITSCHAU

Never heard of a Schrammel operetta? No need for embarrassment; no one had, until Roland Neuwirth, known for his Extremschrammeln group, decided to write one. The result was premiered at this year's Schrammel Klang festival in July in Litschau, Lower Austria, to the pleasure of a sell-out crowd in a new theater facility built for the annual Schrammel music celebration and for community use the rest of the year.

Schrammel music of course refers to the sprightly or melancholy melodies arranged for two violins, contra-guitar and alternatively, accordion or very high-pitched G clarinet, affectionately known as a "picksüßes Hölz'l", or both. The name Schrammel was popularized originally by the two brothers Johann and Josef whose father was born in Litschau, hence the locus of the festival now entering its fourth year. The Schrammel home still stands. The brothers were born in Vienna, the move from Litschau made by the father for economic reasons. With a deep belief in their music, the brothers could find no publisher in Vienna so roamed the streets of the capital city, in particular the wine-growing suburbs on the periphery, playing their compositions and selling piano arrangements. This was in the last decades of the 19th century and within a remarkably few years their family name was a household word, designating a particular type and arrangement of Viennese music.

Neuwirth and his librettist, Peter Ahorner, came up with an amusing story idea for the operetta: in double referenda, the citizens of both Litschau and Vienna overwhelmingly agree to swap locations for a summer. The consequences of city vs. country can readily be imagined and involve two unlikely love affairs which of course end happily. As Neuwirth points out, Offenbach used operetta as a vehicle for satire, as do Ahorner and Neuwirth. Their "Und das bei uns!" ("And that should happen here!") includes some delicious takeoffs on both the Viennese and on the Waldviertler, residents of the forest district in which Litschau is located, close to the Czech border.

"Regional patriotism" is a target for satire with characters ranging from an investment banker (a Viennese, of course) to honest but naive village characters. Voices of the nine principals were consistently excellent as generally is the acoustic of the new hall, leading to the question whether electronic amplification is really necessary. Bertl (Andreas Jankowitsch) and Günther (Reinhold G. Moritz) were standouts among the males and all of the females were of outstanding vocal caliber. A

surprisingly large chorus (16 voices) split into two groups to represent the populations of the two cities involved. Costumes were brilliantly keyed to the personalities and cities. A clever set used three-sided revolving elements on each side of the open stage with photomontages which could turn and combine to replicate Vienna or Litschau. A series of wide screen projected backgrounds united the side panels. The new house seating over 300 is equipped with state-of-the-art lighting and control equipment, used here to best advantage.

True to operetta tradition "Und das bei uns!" included ballet numbers, one of the highlights being a hilarious takeoff on the tango. Neuwirth's score for the operetta is unfailing and has its moments of brilliance. He does not attempt either to imitate or to parody and when the quartet which carries the whole musical side breaks into a waltz melody, the audience responds accordingly.

Altogether the operetta was a highly pleasurable activity although only one element in a long weekend of total musical enjoyment, all in a blissful setting alongside a peaceful lake surrounded by inviting woods. Performances took place simultaneously at six venues around the lake, indeed one on, on a barge which silently cruised the lake with performers and about 40 enthusiasts. Musical styles ranged from traditional Schrammel to Schrammel-Crossover bordering on jazz; the informality of the performances made the event all the more delightful as members of the audience would request their favorites of or by a given group. Some 25 performing groups participated, among them several younger ensembles which had spent a couple of days in Litschau in advance of the main affair to study with some of the top people of the genre.

Much credit for appeal and success of the Schrammel Klang festival goes to the amazingly talented Agnes Palmisano who with other professionals undertook three days of advance workshop training to help new groups find their way into and through the Schrammel genre and repertoire. On one evening Fr. Palmisano presented the younger ensembles in an on-stage gala in the festival theater. Not only did groups perform in the festival venues but also played in a number of Gasthäuser in Litschau and on the town square. On Sunday several Schrammel groups accompanied the narrow-gauge steam train on an excursion up from Gmünd and back, packed with yet more enthusiasts.

Fr. Palmisano was a featured attraction; a highly skilled trained singer, she is acknowledged master of the peculiarly Viennese vocal art of "dudel" employing a form of falsetto similar to a yodel. Word of her interpretations of old Viennese songs has spread and she packs any house where she performs.

The Schrammel Klang festival drew about 3,000 last year; this year the crowd over the three days was estimated at closer to 4,000. The program for 2010 will be available on the website *www.schrammelklang.at* and early booking is advised, particularly for accommodation in the area. Next year's event will feature international Schrammel ensembles and an excellent and authentic group from Canada is one of the hoped-for participants. For anyone with a bent for the happier and the melancholy in Viennese music, the Schrammel Klang festival has to be a "must attend" on their travel schedule.

--- Hamilton, Vienna 4 Aug 2009