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IN REVIEW

VIENNA — *Circus*, Sirene Operntheater, 9/19/06

The first thing that strikes the listener about Jury Everhartz's music is its masterful orchestration; the second thing is that he knows how to write for the voice.

At thirty-five, Everhartz has seven operas behind him. His latest, *Circus*, at Vienna's Sirene Operntheater (seen September 19), proves him to be a rare and welcome commodity: a composer who writes extraordinarily original music, provides both challenges and tonics for his singers, and pleases audiences without ever pandering to common denominators.

Circus draws on greed and manipulation to blur the lines between man and animal. "I believe I've found the intermediate stage between animal and homo sapiens," reads a quote from behavioral scientist Konrad Lorenz in the program: "It is us."

The Circus Director misplaces the box-office receipts, thus initiating a struggle among the performers to steal them. The humans all have animal counterparts: Lucie the high-wire artist (Annette Schön Müller) is also the tigress; bearded lady Olga (Maida Karisik) is the monkey; clown Bruno (Günther Strahlegger) is the elephant; animal tamer Rodolfo (Bartolo Musil) is the bear. The Director's omnipresent Confidante (Nina Maria Plangg) sings so rarely that when she does, all attention is focused on her.

The work is strictly a numbers opera, alternating between duets that propel the story, arias in which commentary is made, complex ensembles (sometimes a cappella), and orchestral interludes. In a tuneful score laden with fascinating vocal lines and astringent tangos, several arias stand out: sticking her face through holes cut into a screen showing the Three Graces, Olga performs a self-conscious striptease waltz, delicately accompanied by flute and pizzicato strings, eventually revealing her entire body covered in thick hair; Bruno sings a rhyme song of childlike simplicity, which spins manically out of control as props pass before him faster than he can grab them; with whips cracking, Rodolfo has passages of Handelian furor.

Indeed, the vocal writing often shows early-music influences. Lucie's aria, sung while suspended on a wire above the stage, before she plummets to the ground in slow motion, reminded me of a Bach cantata. (In a post-performance discussion, Everhartz startlingly remarked of Baroque vocal style, "It's the only way to sing — I hate bel canto.")

Librettist, director and codesigner Kristine Tornquist created a tawdry one-ring circus with a turntable used to move cast and objects through a gold-tinsel curtain. Circus shtick and magic tricks were abundant. Andrea Költringer's richly detailed costumes suggested a state of transition between human and animal.

The only thing wrong with *Circus* was its venue. The Jugenstiltheater has unfortunate, bizarre acoustic properties that made it virtually impossible to understand most of Tornquist's cleverly-constructed libretto (the text was included in the program, forcing the audience to squint in the darkness to follow the plot).

Anna Sushon drew virtuoso performances from the eighteen-piece orchestra. The cast was utterly perfect, showing superb musicianship, unflagging energy and total commitment. The role of the Circus Director, expertly performed by charismatic new-music champion Dieter Kschwendt-Michel, contains a dream bonus for the baritone: he gets to see the soprano in half.

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