

“OPERA IS BIG PORTION OF THE SOCIETY”

DOMINIQUE MEYER DIRECTOR OF THE VIENNA STATE OPERA

Mr. Meyer is the son of a diplomat. He was born in Alsace, France, and spent his childhood in France and Germany, therefore he easily straddles French and German language and culture. Most of his career was in France, among other things running the Paris Opera. He became Director of the Vienna State Opera in September 2010. He is currently a lecturer at the Institut für Theater-, Film und Medienwissenschaft at the University of Vienna. He is completely engaged to the world of Opera.

It's not the first opera house you have worked with. You have had a very long history and cultural life. But please tell me about yourself; how did you manage this career and how have you come here, to Vienna?

This is a long story. When I was young, as I started – I was learning Economic Theory at the University. It was far away from the country, but since I was 18 years old and enjoyed, with passion, almost daily, a concert, opera performance or theater performance, I was happy. Then, I finished my studies and I started to teach at the University, while also working at the French ministry of industry. As a result of my job, we open the second International factory in this city. It was new at that time, it was in '83 and '84. I then worked with, the very famous, Jack Lang, he was Minister of Culture – my job was to modernize the finance system for the movie industry in France. In '86, I started work at the opera, I stayed for two years, as adviser to the Chairman. Then, I went back to the ministry for one year, because they asked me to return. There was a crisis at the opera and he sent for six months to open a new opera house. At the time, I was youngest-ever director of the state opera in Paris, I was 33 at that time. It was a big event because it was broadcast worldwide and President Mitterrand had invited 34 colleagues; President Bush, Ms. Hatcher and Mr. Cole. When you are 33 years old, it's a tough job because security and organization. It was worldwide broadcast and the house was not yet finished. It was a very complicated job, but it worked out well. I stayed only two years, because I thought – first, I was not happy or comfortable with the chairman of the board and second, I thought I was much too young to be a long-term opera director of such a huge operation. With two thousand seats, two big theaters, I just thought it was the wrong way to start. I was sent there as a fireman to open the new opera house, this suddenly meant I was able to run such a big organization at age 33, I was too young. So, I went back to the Government; I was again adviser to Prime Ministers and had a nice area – Culture, Media and Sports. I worked to start the organization of the world cup of football, which was finally organized in France in '98 but began in the early '90s. In '93, our government lost the elections and I thought, at 38 years of age, I have to make a choice of what I'm going to do with the rest of my life. And of course my dream was to go back to the opera house. I was lucky because I could find an opera house in Switzerland, Lausanne; they gave me the job and that was perfect for me because it was an active house and I knew that I was able to run a larger opera house and continue to improve my knowledge. I think we did a very good job there. It was small but beautiful, it was of a very high, international quality. The productions were broadcast on the radio and then to other countries. Since I had a rather small budget, I thought the best way to proceed would be to hire the best young singers, of the world. And of course, if you sold posters at that time, it was not very impressive; because you saw mainly eight male names on the posters, but now if you see the same posters 10 years later; it's a big difference, because many of the singers became famous.

Do you have a sense for those singers that had the “star” potential?

Yes, I thought I knew, but you have to know. You wake and in the early morning, in your bathroom... you shave. You have to face yourself and ask yourself if you are able to do that job or not. I'm a very shy person, so I need to be sure all the time to be able to do a job. I couldn't stay very long in Switzerland, only four seasons. I was asked to go back to Paris to run the Théâtre des Champs Élysées, which is a very beautiful venue. It's a big theater almost two thousands seats; two different architecture and was constructed in 1913. I was familiar with the operation there, so I was very happy to be invited to run that particular theater. We did around 80 symphony concerts per year with all the major conductors; Riccardo Muti, Riccardo Chailly, Kurt Masur, Christian Thielemann, Bernard Haitink and all the great violinists, pianists as well. We did a big series of concert versions of operas, with three directors, researchers and all of the current popular singers. We had four to five operas, fully staged, every season. I was very happy there, it was like paradise. Every day when I went to my theater I was happy. However, I remember in 2007, I had been there for a few years. I was planning my seventh complete Beethoven cycle and I thought – Dominique, now you have to leave, because if you start to do this again with the same repertoire – in the concert business is like that- because you have 400 pieces being played. If you have 80 concerts you can use 200 pieces, so turnover is very fast. So I thought now everything was really nice for maybe, let's say, 15 years. It can be difficult if you stay any longer, because at that time, I was 52 and now is time to find another job because if I waited I would be too



old to find a new job. But once you think it's wise to leave, you hear that little noise in your head – it says, be careful because it's only wise to leave paradise if you can find another one. One evening, we had the Vienna Philharmonic playing, at the Champs-Élysées and two musicians; very important musicians of the orchestra, came to me and said, "Look, the Government in Austria is looking for new Opera Director, we would like you to apply." So, I thought it would be good and I did it... and they offered me the job. So this was a very easy decision.

What was the main motivation? Because you came here with lots of previous experience... What kind of new things you could find here?

Well there are new things in theory, but it's another thing, to live here and discover the daily reality. I do not know of any city where music is as important, as in Vienna. Vienna is a big city of course, but it's not a big, big city like Paris, London or New York. It has 1.7 million people, which is a good sized city – but in France it would be the second city of the country or maybe the third. However, every day 10,000 tickets are sold for classical music. The State Opera performs 300 times, the Fox Opera performs 300 times and the Theater an der Wien... 80 times. Those big concert houses perform 800 times each every day, so it's a huge offer of classic music and it's always sold out. So this is very impressive. I think this is the world capital of music. Of course that a little bit about the Opera business, but to stay here and live here gives you a different impression. For many people, here in Vienna, the opera is really the most important thing. Some say that my job is more important than many ministers, I think that they really give me too much importance. I think it's the result of a big love for music and opera and that is what is really important.

The politicians take care about the music – I think for instance, last week there was big ceremony; the 60 year celebration of Staatsvertrag (Austrian Independence Treaty) and they asked the opera to be present. I went there with part of the orchestra and some singers to perform. They wanted to have a cultural part in the ceremony, maybe one-third of the ceremony. So the French say that culture is a supplement to the soul. Here in Vienna, I think it is the very soul itself. They need classical music, just like some need fresh air to breathe, water to drink and bread to eat. This was very important, when WWII ended, the opera house was destroyed. But three weeks after the end of the war, the company of the State Opera formed together and built another theater; it was just unbelievable.

So this is how you would describe the passion here for the opera and the music. But to be certain, exactly what kind of new things do you want to achieve? I ask this because times are changing and there are always new challenges.

Yes of course. So I have many goals. One goal is that when I might leave the Opera House, that the passion for Vienna's music is the same or better than I found it. The second is to bring the Opera to a more modern situation and today, while we are talking together, Thomas Alders – a very important composer is rehearsing his own piece on the Sixth Floor. It is very important to play more contemporary music and during the New Year, for instance, we perform the Three Sisters, by Peter Eotvos, another very important composer and he also conducts the work. We've asked a few composer to prepare new operas for the State Opera. This is a very important thing and my third goal is that I have and I will continue to reach the same level of quality, for let's say, the daily repertoire performance. Compared to another opera house, where they perform the other system, the

stagione system, for a new production. So this is my wish and I think we are working very hard to reach these goals. Within the first goal, we perform well and do even better with our broadcast system. We had created a completely new broadcasting system this season, for instance, we have broadcast four to five different operas. I think this is the worldwide, biggest offer in the current media. And of course, is very good, but it needs to be better advertised, it's a fantastic system. You can have two channels, one channel is a cut version and one is a complete screen. You can view 10 times a year – this year we have broadcast the new standard in 4k, the new ultra high definition standard. It's fantastic you see, if you have a matching HD screen, you see better than the third row, it's just impressive. And this is for me very important because we need to reach all of the opera lovers in the world, not only people that live in big cities, but also people living in camps or in the mountains or in the valleys. This is very important issue for Democracy. The last goal is that we bring this love for opera and for music, to the generations. Therefore, we perform many productions for children. We have a massive children's program, this year for instance, we have performed 45 performances only for children. We have special prices for the families, but people can bring the children here for the normal performances. We also have performances the day after the ball, the famous Opera Ball. We use

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this location which is very big to perform twice, and we have on that day 7,000 children, it's amazing. Another thing that we do is to use our broadcasting system to reach into the schools, with special programs. So for over a year we have worked with more than 150 schools, in order to interest the children in opera.

These are very great plans and from what you told me, lots of efforts have been made during the past five years of your stay here, but you mentioned that the opera ball is the most famous event right now. I have heard it also has changed a little bit, in the structure, in the last few years. Can you tell me about it?

Yes, because my impression was that the Opera Ball was a definitely a big ball in the building of the opera. I was not satisfied with that, because this has to be the day where the opera presents itself to a large population, because as you know, this event is broadcast by the TV and it has the biggest market share every year. It's more

than the final of the world cup football, in this country – 60%, market share is enormous. I thought this is one day where we need use the amount of people watching the TV to present the opera in a better way. And the first thing that I did was to bring the orchestra, because we have the famous Vienna Philharmonic play every night here. The only night where they were not performing was the night of the ball. So I thought this is ineffective and I asked them to perform and since five years, they performed every year and they were happy to do it. Also, we have completely changed the way we organize the opening; I needed the opening to be beautiful, really beautiful. You have to be astonished, it's like a fairytale and we needed to give a very strong impression. So, definitely, we have changed many, many things. We have been trying to involve the artist, not only the opera artist, but many actress, composers and singers also of like music, not only classical music, my colleagues from the museum, from the concert hall and also from the cinema industry. So it is like a meeting point for the world of the arts and it's also one big party. I like the artists to appear not only as guests, but like the organizers of this event, as well.

How do you see the relation between culture and economics?

Culture can be very important for an economy. For instance, in this house we sell more than 99% of the available tickets, almost 600,000 tickets, every year. 70% of the tickets are sold to Austrian people, so it means that we have strong link between the opera and Austria. It's very important that Austrians like opera, but this means you have 30% of people coming from abroad, this means that we are responsible for 200,000, nights in the hotels. This is like, I don't know... a train, Culture is the engine of the train and of course the 200,000 tourists that come to see our performances they come to Vienna to see these performances and of course they sleep in the hotels, they go to eat in the restaurants, they go to buy goods in our stores.

So, Opera is big portion of the society, in Vienna. In my opinion the politicians should never forget these two dimensions; the political dimension of the culture, this is great help to the democracy and the economic dimension... when it's good and organized, culture can bring a lot money into our local society. ■

