

THE JOURNEY OF A LIFETIME: ALPINE FESTIVALS IN AUSTRIA - AUGUST/ SEPTEMBER 2023



We were collected in the lavish portals of the Hilton Hotel at Munich airport on 19 August in two large cars driven by our wonderful agent Claudia and her husband Michael. It was the start of an epic journey to Salzburg for its famous festival then across the most beautiful green hills and rocky mountains of Austria to Innsbruck for its festival of early music before driving across the Tyrol to Bregenz at the western end of the country on the shore of Bodensee (Lake Constance). For five days we were driven 30 minutes to and from the spacious green hills and valleys of Schwarzenberg chamber music in the for seven glorious concerts at the **Schubertiade**, perhaps the most treasured festival of



Eagle's nest

world. After all this, on 3 September, Claudia and Michael drove us all the way back to Munich airport for our return flights to Australia.

Sally and I had first planned this journey in 2018 but first Covid and later other issues scotched our plans twice so for us it was a thrill for it finally to take place.

In Salzburg we stayed in the Scherer, a comfortable family hotel outside the city centre with the advantage of having our talks and breakfasts in the garden under the shade of huge leafy trees. Our first full day was huge: a new production of *The Marriage of Figaro* at 3 pm followed by Mahler's 9th symphony in the evening! The *Figaro*, directed by controversial Viennese director Martin Kusej, had been greeted by boos at its premiere a couple of weeks earlier, and I think some of our group would have liked to boo too. It set the opera in recent times in an *echt* Mafia-like power setting with Cherubino the only happy likeable character. Totally unfunny and unlike any Figaro you have ever seen, I thought it had its own narrative logic of power exploitation inherent in da Ponte's text and was beautifully sung and played with real verve by the Vienna Philharmonic under Rafael Pichon. Lea Desandre stood out as a delightful Cherubino with Sabine Devieille as Susanna, Adriana Gonzalez as the Countess and Andre Schuen as the Count all excellent.

After a light dinner at the Cafe Mozart, we entered the Felsenreitschule (Rock Riding School), the first venue for the Salzburg festival when it was founded in 1920, for a performance of Mahler's 9th played by maybe the world's finest youth orchestra, the Mahler Youth Orchestra, under Jacob Hrusa. In the splendid acoustic of the rock hewn hall, there was no controversy about this performance - it was magnificent, and the audience all stood and gave prolonged applause. We fell into bed that night with the excitement of the Mahler ringing in our ears.

The next morning Andrew Neill gave a talk on Bellini's neglected early 19th century neglected bel canto opera *I Capuleti ed I Montecchi*, extolling its virtues and playing mouth-watering excerpts. During the day we wandered around the old city, some taking the funicular up to the Fortress over looking Salzburg, others shopping its smart streets, others going to the organ recital in the cathedral. But altogether we returned to the Felsenreitschule in the evening for a concert performance of Bellini's opera that was a revelation to us all, full of excitement and spectacular singing, especially from the central duo of Romeo and Giulietta, the young Russian born mezzo (whose name I can't recall) and the Danish soprano Elsa Dreisig with the Mozarteum Orchestra conducted by Marco Armiliato.

Tuesday 22nd was a non-performance day so it was perfect that in hot weather of well over 30 degrees we drove to St Gilgen to take a ferry along lakes to the lovely traditional lakeside town of St Wolfgang where we marvelled at the half timbered houses and buildings and in due course separated into two groups for lakeside lunches before returning by ferry. In the evening we were driven to a lovely village in the hills, where we sat at outdoor tables at a restaurant called Maria Plane to have a delicious dinner looking out to beautiful views in balmy warm weather, a relief from the Salzburg heat.

Wednesday, our last day in Salzburg was spectacular. Claudia and Michael drove us up through the green hills behind the city to a staging point where we caught buses up a steep winding road to Eagle's Nest, some 1800 metres high and with stupendous views of the surrounding mountain ranges and distant valleys. Some of us ventured up along perilous sharp rocky paths to the very top. Eagle's Nest is famous (notorious) for being

Hitler's hand-picked and specially constructed mountain retreat to entertain his VIP visitors and cronies. Hitler saw little of it and (happily for millions of subsequent visitors), like us, the Allies attempts to bomb it to smithereens failed.

In the evening we went back to the Haus fur Mozart for a four hands piano recital by much admired Japanese pianist Mitsuko Uchida with American Jonathan Biss of mostly rarely heard Schubert piano duets. It turned out to be a disappointingly routine performance that made me wonder why such a prestigious festival such as Salzburg had scheduled it.

So, on to Innsbruck on Thursday 24th. As always in Austria, the drive through rolling countryside was beautiful and much enhanced by a detour to the world-famous ski resort of Kitzbuhel where the vast ski slopes seemed to extend to impenetrably high mountains. Arriving in Innsbruck for their Festival of Early music, the stifling heat of Salzburg was promptly replaced by chilly wet weather. We stayed in a much grander hotel, Grauer Baer, in the old centre of the city and quickly discovered it is an elegant city, full of historic buildings, charming narrow streets and we were a stone's throw from the grand imperial palace of the Hapsburgs. On our first evening we took our umbrellas barely 100 metres from the hotel to the Hofkirche, a stupendously grand church dominated by more than 20 larger than life size intricately carved brass or steel cast statues of 17th and 18th century monarchs or heroes and their ladies. We sat in the front rows facing a gated chapel with elaborate altar (also full of audience) to hear a grandiose concert of the 'Grand Tour' by His Majesty's Sackbutts and Cornetts. The only problem was that the performers of all the sonorous pieces for brass instruments (by English, then German, then Italian composers) were completely invisible, the music seeming to come from somewhere, but nowhere specific! The rather motley group of performers finally appeared at the end of the concert to take applause, having apparently performed invisible to the entire audience from a high balcony at the west end of the church. My perhaps equally crazy thought was why didn't they turn around all the chairs and pews so we could see them performing?

Friday, our first full day in Innsbruck, started with a two hour guided walk around Innsbruck led by the garrulous and charming (Harry?). In the evening we went to the city's opera house, a splendid theatre called the Landestheater for a dramatically staged performance of Vivaldi's only oratorio, *Juditha Triumphans*, based on the biblical story of the widow Judith, who becomes the saviour of the city of Bethulia under Assyrian siege, turned by Vivaldi and his librettist into an allegory of the Venetian-Austrian Turkish War that began in 1714. The heroic Judith vamps the Assyrian leader Holofernes to fall in love with her, then ruthlessly slits his throat after their love-making. The production and costuming, mostly in shades of red, was simple but effective and the two lead roles were superbly sung by Sophie Rennert and Anastasia Boldyreva.

In my talk on *Juditha Triumphans*, I also spoke briefly about the two concerts for Saturday 26th, eagerly anticipating Jeffrey Francis' recital of Dowland songs from the Elizabethan era and Venetian gondolier songs. I thought it should be delightful, but I think most of us agreed it was the low point of all our performances. We were crowded into the tiny chapel of the imposing Ambras Castle outside Innsbruck, some of us wedged up against the rough stone walls. Jeffrey Francis was a squat elderly man who with his lutenist accompanist sat stolidly in the tiny apse, scarcely to be seen by the audience, and sang the fanciful youthful songs like funeral dirges with no expression. By coincidence, he opened the door for me politely the next day at the concert for finalists of the Cesti

competition (as a fellow member of the audience) and with an ironic smile, I said to him, 'bit of a comedown being an usher!'



From the Cathedral in Innsbruck

The evening concert was something else altogether. Back in the Ambras Palace, this time it took place in the magnificent Spanish Hall, a flat ceilinged baroque extravaganza covered on all walls and the ceiling in fantastic baroque paintings and frescoes. We had Giulia Semenzato, a fine soprano who had studied and researched in Venice the history and practices of the early 18th century Ospedale della Pieta for young female singers and musicians. She sang songs and suites from that period with a terrific ensemble from the Drottningholm Opera.

On Sunday 25th we were due to drive high up to Nordketten but the wet and windy weather prevented this. In the evening we attended the new concert hall for the final of the Cesti competition for young baroque singers. Most of us thought the standard very high and much fun was had arguing who we preferred and eventually handing in our audience prize judgements. The winner was a mezzo Mathilde Ortscheidt who didn't especially impress most of us. Several of us thought the best was British soprano Charlotte Bowden who was runner up and a bravura baritone Alexandre Baldo who won the Audience prize.

It was still wet and cold on Tuesday 27th so we drove straight to Bregenz for the Schubertiade concerts in Schwarzenberg rather than spending the day at the pretty lakeside villages at Achensee where in nice weather we might have gone swimming. On the way to Bregenz you probably all remember our stop for lunch at the very superior highway rest stop operated by the largest supplier of schinken in Austria where we had delicious soups and other goodies. Arriving in Bregenz at the Hotel Messmer, we were immediately impressed with its location on an elegant pedestrian street with galleries, smart shops, spacious outdoor restaurants and views of Bodensee all nearby. Our good impression on arrival was much enhanced by the sun and fine weather and I think it's fair to say we soon thought Bregenz was a pearl of a town with Bodensee stretching to the west as far as the eye could see and framed by spectacular mountains behind the city.

The next morning, Wednesday, many of us strolled around the residential part of the old city, full of elegant old houses and institutional buildings in streets and squares that gave Bregenz a sophisticated aspect behind the smart commercial centre. Then after lunch, Claudia and Michael bundled us into the cars for the first of five daily 30 minute excursions into the glorious green hills with craggy mountain backdrops before dropping us in the village of Schwarzenberg full of old unpainted wooden (larch) houses. We walked along a lane to a larger unpainted wooden building - the Angelika Kauffmann Hall, situated on a rise facing the most stunning backdrop of rich green ridges and valleys framed by towering cliffs and mountains. 500 or more smartly dressed patrons stood outside the hall with glasses of wine enjoying the gorgeous scenic setting in perfect afternoon sunshine.

View from Angelika Kauffmann Hall at Schwarzenberg



Our group's jaws literally dropped at the elegance and splendour. Soon enough, two young women in traditional costume appeared near the hall with French horns and proceeded to play a short medley of melodies to welcome the audience into the hall for the concert. The interior of the hall is built entirely of wood in a bright yellowish colour with the ceiling a high inverted V. All of us were entranced, first by simply sitting in the beautiful space, then by the music of the Brahms Clarinet Quintet followed after the interval by a thrilling performance of Schubert's Death and the Maiden quartet. The performers were the Elias Quartet from Manchester and the English clarinettist Robert Plane. After the concert, we were met outside by Claudia and Michael who steered us to a charming local restaurant in one of the typical wooden houses where we sat down to a delicious three course dinner at the Gasthof Adler. Then each of us replete, we strolled back to the Hall for another concert, all vocal this time with a group of four singers, Nikola Hillebrandt (sop), Sophie Rennert (mezzo, a regular at the Schubertiade and had sung Judith at our

Vivaldi opera/ oratorio in Innsbruck), Stuart Jackson (a huge tenor) and the baritone Manuel Walsler and two leading British accompanists Malcolm Martineau and Joseph Middleton. The program was mostly little known Schumann songs and duets and particularly attractive were the Spanish love songs. When we exited at 10 pm, most of us were exhausted from the musical, scenic and other delights of the day, and snoozed on the drive back to our hotel in Bregenz.



The next day, Friday August 31, was more of the same in that we had two concerts in Schwarzenberg and a splendid dinner there in a private room at the town's best restaurant. I found myself apologising for exhausting the group with all the travel to (heavenly) Schwarzenberg and all the (top class) music.

Most of us, after breakfast, not wanting to waste perfect sunny weather, took the cable car up the mountain behind Bregenz where we have spectacular 360 degree views of the hills, valleys, distant mountains and the length and breadth of Bodensee.

The afternoon concert was (for me) perhaps the stand-out recital of all seven concerts we attended at the Schubertiade, an all Schubert programme of his finest songs including most of the great songs in his last song cycle *Schwanengesang*. In the morning at my talk about the program, Andrew Neill played on his device several of the *Schwanengesang* and other songs we would hear, sung by great artists of the past like Hans Hotter and Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau. As a result, we were well prepared for an outstanding recital given by Andre Schuen accompanied by the sensitive long-haired accompanist Daniel Heide. Schuen is the young baritone who had sung Count Almaviva in the Salzburg *Figaro* we saw. He is now one of the most in-demand opera and recital singers in Europe and wowed us with his lovely voice and handsome stage presence.

The evening recital by French pianist David Fray was more controversial. Another handsome youngish man, he had an odd address to the piano, leaning back from the keyboard in a red-backed chair, at least until the music became complicated. Most of the first half was the four impromptus D899 which I felt lacked some of their inherent lilt and charm. The Allegretto after the interval was beautiful but the main piece for the second half was the Wanderer Fantasy, probably Schubert's most bravura extended piece for piano. Fray certainly went for its bravura and in the last movement stormed home

fortissimo at a furious tempo. While the audience seemed to like it, I for one, have never heard the Wanderer fantasy played like that.

Our remaining three concerts at Schwarzenberg (and of our journey) were on separate days, easier for everyone including Claudia and Michael who didn't have to wait around so long. But the quality of the performances and our enjoyment remained high. On Saturday 1 September, having an evening concert only, gave us the chance to take a ferry to the island of Lindau, a 20 minute journey away but situated across the border in Germany. Lindau could not have been more different from quietly elegant Bregenz with its mountainous backdrop. It is colourful, crowded, full of narrow streets and all sorts of unusual historic buildings and churches, even the two major Catholic and Protestant churches side by side in what looked more like an Italian piazza.

With a full day at our disposal before setting off for Schwarzenberg, some of the group visited one or more of the interesting museums and galleries in Bregenz. Of special interest was the newish Kunst Haus, clad in seemingly opaque glass panels and coating an amazing and deeply impressive exhibition by central African artist Michael Armitage, ranging spaciouly over the top three floors. The large scale, colourful and complex images mostly traced the plight and exploitation of central African people in powerful and mesmerising works that I found eloquent, disturbing but moving. Armitage is now exhibited in the great galleries all over the world but clearly has not forgotten his roots and his empathy for the people of Africa.

The evening concert in Schwarzenberg was given by British soprano Louise Alder accompanied by Joseph Middleton and in the final item, Schubert's wonderful late vocal/trio for soprano, piano and clarinet *The Shepherd on the Rock*, by Austrian clarinetist Clare Hofer. Louise Alder sang well, especially the Mozart bracket in the middle of her program and they brought the house down with the Shepherd on the Rock at the end.

On Sunday, the final full day of our Alpine journey, we walked along the Bregenz foreshore towards the large outdoor theatre where for the better part of the summer, huge operatic production are presented on a giant stage floating on the lake. *Madama Butterfly*, the opera for 2023, had closed a week or two earlier and we could see *Der Freischutz* of Weber was scheduled for 2024. We were heading for Wirtshaus am See, a huge outdoor restaurant on the lake shore where we enjoyed our group's farewell lunch.

After the lunch most of us returned to the hotel for a rest before heading back to Schwarzenberg for the evening concert, this time a solo recital by Russian born but Berlin resident pianist Igor Levit, now one of the most celebrated pianists in the world. It was the only concert at this Schubertiade where the program included no Schubert at all. He started with some of the rarely heard Choral Preludes Brahms composed for organ late in his life, arranged for solo piano by Busoni. These mostly solemn pieces composed as an *homage* to JS Bach were played with great delicacy by Levit and followed by a fascinating extended piece by American jazz composer Fred Hersh, a great friend of Levit's and played with terrific panache. After the interval, he played an arrangement by Hungarian composer Zoltan Kocsis of the Prelude to Wagner's *Tristan and Isolde*. I thought this a strange setting that missed the rapt and mysterious atmosphere of Wagner's opera. It's almost inaudible ending, as played by Levit, was followed almost immediately by the similarly soft beginning to the last item, Liszt's Sonata in B minor, confusing many in the audience who only became aware he was now playing the Liszt from the subsequent loud passages. The Liszt was a genuine *tour de force* with devastating changes of tempo and dynamics. Some of our group thought it overblown,

but I felt it was tremendously exciting and that the Liszt sonata with its wayward ideas and huge contrasts is just the sort of piece to benefit from such uninhibited treatment.

All good things must come to an end, and so to our last day and last concert at 11 am on Monday morning. After breakfast we were all packed and Claudia and Michael loaded our luggage into the cars, a little more space this time as Wendy and Rob Willcocks had decided to miss the last concert and catch a train to Vienna for the last few days of their trip. For the last drive to Schwarzenberg, Michael chose to take a different and more circuitous route high up into the mountains with stupendous views. We arrived at the Angelika Kaufmann Hall in brilliant morning sunshine and some of us took a walk along a little road beyond the hall with a sense of sadness of leaving this memorable setting and its music we had enjoyed for five days.

The final program (also the final program for this Schubertiade) was simple: Schubert's last two piano trios, composed in the last year of his life, both long and serenely melodious. Played by Levit, leading French violinist Renaud Capuçon and superb young Austrian cellist Julia Hagen, the performance was sublime and the audience rapturous, a perfect way for our journey and the festival itself to end.



A three hour drive to Munich airport followed and we dispersed to our various destinations. For Sally and me it seemed the most memorable of all the 19 overseas musical group journeys we have organised since 2014. As we parted, I said this to Claudia who has managed most of them, and she smiled and said: "But you say this about all your tours." I replied: "Yes they get better every time, especially when you drive us everywhere!" It's true, the experience of Claudia and Michael, their efficiency, local

knowledge and sense of humour make all the difference for us and our groups. We could not imagine a tour in Europe without them and are enormously grateful.

I final thank you to all of you on our Alpine journey. For it was wonderful and I hope it was for you, and that you might join us again on one of our future trips.

Sally and Antony

12 September 2023