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Portrait of Omer Meir Wellber

‘What else is one supposed to do?’

Thanks to his talents and patrons, conductor Omer Meir Wellber is on his way to becoming one of the real greats

by Christian Schmidt

For this interview, Omer Meir Wellber was quite happy to arrange a meeting in the heart of the city which he has chosen as his home base for his world tours as a conductor: the Neumarkt in Dresden. Here he has a flat in the immediate vicinity: after all, several times a year he is on the rostrum of the Staatskapelle, which, less out of a sense of duty than with real enthusiasm he counts among the world’s best orchestras. And he should know, for, for all his cosmopolitanism, Wellber – who has German roots that lie a long way back, but can still be traced – makes no secret of his liking for an individual sound. Above all when we’re talking about works that locally based ensembles have in their blood. ‘You don’t have to conduct Richard Strauss here; you live him. I’ve just been listening to the legacy of Karl Böhm, who had a prominent place in our record cabinet at home.’ A dialogue without words takes place in rehearsals and performances alike, he says, something that is only possible with orchestra with a strong character of their own, such as the Staatskapelle. ‘While orchestral standards have risen internationally, orchestral identities are being lost.’

In spite of his almost youthful age, Wellber can now choose which engagements he wants to accept – worldwide. As a result, he only does repertoire performances with orchestras he knows well. ‘In Dresden, for example, two rehearsals is enough, where elsewhere I might need ten.’ Quite generally, the attractive, likable conductor has very clear principles, from which he hardly ever departs. If an enquiry comes long in advance, he is prepared for one third of the programme to contain pieces that need to be newly rehearsed, while for the rest he draws on his repertoire. And that is, heaven knows, enormous. For the things in the operatic or symphonic literature that other conductors need a lifetime for, here Wellber has filled the gaps in his programme in no time at all. How does he manage? ‘Thank heavens I have an immense memory, which was trained while I was studying in Be’er Sheva.’

For new productions he is totally present during the rehearsal process

Precisely this accordingly meticulous study of scores is also the source of the compelling power of his performances: 'I keep as closely as possible to the score,' says Wellber quite soberly. 'What else is one supposed to do?' Only that doesn't result in a mere spelling out, but rather in an inner glow, as though the composers themselves were standing on the rostrum! Wellber is always their advocate – not least in sensitive matters which have to be fought out with stage directors. 'If I'm not happy, no one is, and if it isn't good, I'd rather go.' So says without any false modesty a conductor who is also prepared to climb on to the stage of a new production. 'I try to be very much present from the very beginning, I work a lot with the singers and coach the rehearsals myself. That means we've built up a very personal relationship by the time of the performances.'

A similar devotedness takes the conductor time and again back to his Israeli homeland, where he regularly performs – not without concern regarding the situation or criticism of the political leadership, but at the same time a patriot through and through. For in spite of, or perhaps precisely because of the contradictions of the war, there is here, he says, the 'surrealist situation' that in the capital and its environs, with less than a million inhabitants, there is a huge, publicly financed arts scene. 'In Tel Aviv that's everyday life for you: people take to the pleasures of art as a way of escaping the real dangers.'

**Concerti
November 2014**