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Interview

Интервью

An Interview with Austrian Bass-Baritone Rupert Bergmann

Интервью с австрийским басом-баритоном Рупертом Бергманом

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Abstract. The editorial board of the journal ICONI is happy to present to our readers an interview with Austrian bass-baritone Rupert Bergmann, a talented, artistic musician, brilliant performer of the classical vocal repertoire, an ardent enthusiast of contemporary vocal music, and a participant of many contemporary music concerts and festivals. Rupert Bergmann was born in 1956 in Graz, studied at the Graz Music Academy, then moved to Vienna, where he has lived ever since. He has performed in many concert and opera venues in Austria and in other countries of the world, where he has sung premieres of works by composers from many countries. He has frequently instigated composers to write mini-mono-operas for solo bass-baritone and small chamber ensemble on Biblical plots, or on comic librettos, from Aristophanes' plays to those by contemporary playwrights. This interview was taken from the musician in July 2021 at the festival Two Days and Two Nights of New Music, where he sang premieres of two new mini-mono-operas.

Аннотация. Редакция журнала «ИКОНИ» рада представить нашим читателям интервью с австрийским басом-баритоном Рупертом Бергманом, ярким артистичным музыкантом, блистательным исполнителем классического вокального репертуара и рьяным энтузиастом современной вокальной музыки, участником многих концертов и фестивалей современной музыки. Руперт Бергман родился в 1956 году в городе Грац, обучался в Музыкальной академии Граца, затем переехал в Вену, где с тех пор и проживает. Он выступал во многих концертных и оперных залах Австрии и других стран мира, пел премьеры сочинений многих композиторов из разных стран. Часто инициировал композиторов на сочинение для него мини-моно-опер для баса-баритона и небольших камерных ансамблей на библейские сюжеты либо на комические либретто от пьес Аристофана до современных авторов. Интервью было взято у музыканта в июле 2021 года на фестивале «Два дня и две ночи новой музыки», где он выступал с премьерами двух новых мини-моно-опер.

Keywords:

Austria, bass-baritone, vocal music, opera, contemporary vocal music, festival of contemporary music, mini-mono-opera

Ключевые слова:

Австрия, бас-баритон, вокальная музыка, опера, современная вокальная музыка, фестиваль современной музыки, мини-моно-опера

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Anton Rovner: *Mr. Bergmann, could you tell us when did you start your musical activities, and where did you study?*

Rupert Bergmann: I was born in 1965 in Graz, Austria. I grew up partly in Munich, because my father worked there as a scientist, but when I was ten years old my family moved back to Graz, where I studied at the Graz Gymnasium. When I was a child, my parents wanted all their children to receive a musical education and to learn to play musical instruments. I started by studying the recorder and the flute, and then changed to the cello. I also studied piano when I was in high school. When I turned eighteen, I somehow started being interested in singing. Before that I only sang from time to time in a church as a cantor soloist. Then, in 1985 I decided to take the entrance exam to study at the Graz Music Academy (now KUG — University of Music and Performing Arts). I was accepted and studied there for seven years with opera singing as my major subject. I was very happy, because I had the opportunity of singing many of the works from the standard opera repertoire, such as the three Mozart operas written on Da Ponte's librettos — the Count in *La Nozze de Figaro*, Don Giovanni in *Don Giovanni* and Guglielmo in *Così fan Tutti*, as well as Kaspar in Weber's *Der Freischütz*. I graduated from the academy in 1992, receiving a degree of Master of Art. Then time arrived for me to move away from Graz, because it holds true that the place where you study is never good for making a career, and this took a couple of years. So

I decided to go to Vienna, and there at the time there were musical activities taking place — not only the big opera houses, but also small opera companies which focused on contemporary music, over a hundred of them, performing in strange, not well-known venues. This was my entrance to the musical scene in Vienna in 1995 — to this “off opera scene” there. I performed a considerable amount of operas there, including the title role in Alban Berg's *Wozzeck*, Leonard Bernstein's *Candide*, *The Second Mrs. Kong* and *Last Supper* by Harrison Birtwistle, *Mahagonny* by Bertold Brecht and Kurt Weill and *The Rape of Lucretia* by Benjamin Britten. Apart from that, I participated in numerous world premieres of operas by the many composers who lived in Vienna at the time, such as Wolfram Wagner, Kurt Schwertzig and Bernhard Lang, to indicate a few names. There was one opera project in which from seven to nine composers were asked to write short operas, which were then performed in a row. From this idea I developed my own subsequent mini-mono-opera projects which I initiated in various other venues, including the festival of contemporary music *Two Days and Two Nights of New Music* in Odessa.

Anton Rovner: *You have participated a number of times at the contemporary music festival “Two Days and Two Nights of New Music” in Odessa and have sung a whole set of short operas for one singer and small chamber ensemble which last about 20-30 minutes, nevertheless, are saturated with a sufficient emotional and theatrical content*



*Photo 1. Rupert Bergmann performing in Werner Schulze's
mini-mono-opera "Trygaios"
(Odessa, July 2021)
[photo credit: Rupert Bergmann]*

to be compared to large-scale operas in their breadth. Could you tell us about your affiliation with this festival and about what compositions you have performed there?

Rupert Bergmann: My connection with this festival started also with the little "off-opera" group ARBOS Musictheater in Austria with which I had been affiliated and which brought me to Odessa in 1997, to perform at the festival the third time it was held. We performed *Das Konzert des Vögel* by a group of four composers from the Austrian province of Carinthia. This marked the beginning of my connection with this festival, and this is when I made the acquaintance of Karmella Tsepikolenko, the festival's director, who is herself a prominent composer in Ukraine. I found the festival to be of exceptionally

high quality and wished to continue my connection with it. I was intrigued by Odessa not only for artistic reasons, but also for biographical reasons. My father, whom I mentioned before, who was a scientist, started connections with Eastern countries in the 1970s, and we as a family sometimes travelled with him to such countries as Hungary and Bulgaria, and so we were somewhat acquainted with the situation of Eastern Europe beyond the Iron Curtain before that particular decade. So coming to Eastern Europe was something which was not new to me, and I had the wish of continuing the relations with this part of the world. In 2000 I asked Karmella Tsepikolenko to compose a few songs for me which I could perform in a project in Austria, which she

did, I performed them a number of times there. In 2006 I established contact again with Karmella and offered to participate in her festival, so she invited me again to perform at the festival in 2007. At that time, it was still held not in the Philharmonic Society Hall, where it has been held later, but in a large hall for popular music on Richelieu Street, before it was rebuilt as a shopping center. There are a number of Ukrainian composers, including Mikhaylo Shved, who composed works for me to sing. So around that time the idea of composing mini-mono-operas was formed. After the festival I offered Karmella to compose an opera or a work in the genre of musical theater for me to sing.

Anton Rovner: *Was it the opera “Heute Abend Boris Godunow” (“Tonight Boris Godunov”) which you performed at the festival in April 2019 in such an impressive theatrical manner? Could you tell us about your participation in the creation and subsequent performance of this opera?*

Rupert Bergmann: Yes, it was particularly this work that she composed. At that time, we were looking around for a libretto for the opera Karmella could write for me. I was looking for something with biographical connotations for me. Finally, we found a very funny story about a singer who is sitting in his dressing room in an opera theater waiting for his entrance on stage in a production of Mussorgsky’s *Boris Godunov*. The idea of the story is that he is waiting to go on stage, but as the time for him to come out arrives, he discovers that his voice is gone, and he starts to cough. He tries to recover his voice, but is unsuccessful in doing so. So he decides to try out the part of a different character from the opera. This results in a very grotesque situation, since it would never happen in real life that a singer would decide the last minute to sing the part of a different character. He tries out the part of Shuysky, but then changes his mind and find Shuysky’s role to be bad, since he, the singer, wishes to be the big star in the performance, while this particular protagonist of the opera is a bad character. Musing on what other character

of *Boris Godunov* he could sing, he decides next to sing the role of the fool, since this protagonist is always appreciated by the audiences. So he puts on the costume of the fool, but in the last minute he decides that he does not wish to make a fool of himself, nor does he wish to have the stage director fool him. At the end of the story he decides not to sing in the opera production at all that particular night and to go home and enjoy a quiet evening with a roasted chicken in front of the TV. The libretto was written by an Austrian stage director Kristine Tornquist, who actually also has directed for a long time an opera company in Vienna, with which I have also sung in a couple of productions. My idea was to combine the opera composed by Karmella with other works which also reflect somehow those roles which I never played on stage. I have never sung the part of Boris in *Boris Godunov*, which I probably could have done; I have never sung the part of Bluebeard in Bartok’s opera *Bluebeard’s Castle*; nor have I ever sung the part of Papageno in Mozart’s opera *The Magic Flute*. So new theatrical manifestations of these three particular characters became the theme of new operas presented during an entire night. Two more operas were written for me, one by Hungarian composer Samuel Gryllus about a very strange, inner-reflecting contemplation of Bluebeard from Bartok’s *Bluebeards Castle*, and another one by well-known Austrian composer Johanna Doderer, who wrote a paraphrase of the character of Papageno for me. I successfully presented these three operatic works together in 2011 in Vienna in a run of 4 performances at the Wiener Kammeroper in a co-production with the Theater an der Wien — historic opera house of Vienna where *Fidelio* and *Fledermaus* had their world premieres. I was happy that Karmella could come to Vienna to attend this production, and the other two composers were also present at the performances. Unfortunately, it has not been possible since that night to perform the entire project of these three particular operas together anywhere else again.



*Photo 2. Rupert Bergmann as Tevye in the Jerry Bock's musical "Fiddler on the Roof", Mörbisch Festival, Austria, 2014
[photo credit: Rupert Bergmann]*

The performance of these three works was very demanding in terms of the technical and the musical challenges, even though the entire performance took up only one hour. I performed Karmella's opera a few times after that, including in Odessa at the festival *Two Days and Two Nights of New Music* in April 2019, which you saw. The instrumental part was performed by the Senza Sforzando chamber ensemble, conducted by Oleksandr Perepelytsia Jr. I have even performed it once at the Lviv Opera House in Lviv, Ukraine, and I remember the particularly lively and exciting performance in Donetsk in 2013. So the circumstances have developed that I started coming to this festival every other

year to perform — in 2012, 2014, 2016, 2018, 2019, and now in 2021. I think it makes absolute sense for me to skip one year, since it takes time to prepare adequately for a performance of contemporary music. I am also given financial support by the Austrian Cultural Forum in Kiev, but they would not agree to fund me every year.

Anton Rovner: *Besides classical opera and contemporary music, what other types of vocal music have you performed? Are you interested at all in the genres of operetta or the musical?*

Rupert Bergmann: I have been quite involved in singing in operettas. Apart from classical opera and contemporary music, it

has been my main focus as a singer. During the time I established connections with the festival in Odessa in the late 1990s, I was quite busy with performances of operettas, of which I have sung a considerable amount. I have sung in Johann Strauss' *Die Fledermaus* a number of times, including productions in Vienna, in Tokyo, in Santiago, Chile, and a number of other cities. I have performed in Cark Millöcker's *The Beggar Student*, Franz Lehar's *The Gypsy Baron*, as well as a number of lesser-known operettas by Lehar, such as, for instance, *Frasquita* and *Giuditta* — there are CD's available of some of the productions in which I have participated. I also sung Jerry Bock's *Fiddler on the Roof* in three different productions.

Anton Rovner: *Your performances of contemporary operas are very theatrical in their nature. Have you had any experience in performing in dramatic theater, besides opera? Or is your theatrical approach simply part of the art and craft of being an opera singer?*

Rupert Bergmann: One important point is that I had a very good music teacher at the Music Academy in Graz. He continued the East German theatrical traditions, and he really taught his students the technique of singing opera and the theatrical effects inherent to them. In addition, from the very beginning of my singing activities, I was very interested in the process of telling a story, and not limiting myself merely to producing nice vocal sounds. There have been a few occasions where I brought in the narrative, theatrical element into my performances, even at the expense of the good sound — and I have been criticized for this. Sometimes, it simply becomes impossible to focus solely on refined *bel canto* vocal sound for technical reasons — because the singer is tensely conveying the message of his or her role, or, otherwise, if he or she becomes irritated by the lighting on stage, or for countless other reasons. I have always found it more interesting in presenting my role as a singer on stage in all of its combined aspects — the musical,

the narrative and the theatrical. This is why I allow myself to do more acting on stage than, maybe, I ought to, at times.

Anton Rovner: *I think that this is a very justified approach for singers to convey the message of the text in the music they are singing. In an opera, just as in a song cycle, the subject matter is just as important as the music set to it.*

Rupert Bergmann: I must also add, that if I come to a country where people understand neither German, nor English — the two languages I sing most often in — I think it should be very important to find the theatrical means to convey the subject matter to the audience in a way that transcends the words to which the music is set, so that the audience would understand the semantic message of the musical composition even without understanding the words.

Anton Rovner: *Do you have any stylistic preferences for the contemporary operatic compositions written for you to sing? Do you prefer a more avant-garde style, a more traditional, romantic style, or something in between? Have you performed any of the vocal compositions by Schoenberg, Berg, Boulez or Ligeti?*

Rupert Bergmann: When I examine a musical composition which I am considering performing, I am more interested in what this work has to tell, than what particular style it is written in. It is possible to make a great performance both theatrically and musically, for example, with such an opera as Alban Berg's *Wozzeck*, in which I have performed once, or with Bernstein's *Candide*, which is a tonal work, since both of them are substantive compositions endowed with both the philosophical messages of their plotlines and the profound expressivity of their musical means. So I do not have any real preferences in terms of the style of the music I perform in. If I speak more from the singer's perspective, tonal music is simply easier to perform, because you can direct it from the ear, and you do not need to have so much contact with the conductor in order to sound it out. In atonal music it



Photo 3. Rupert Bergmann at the festival of contemporary music "Two Days and Two Nights of New Music". Odessa, 2021 [photo credit: Rupert Bergmann]

frequently becomes the case that it is not possible to grasp it by ear, you have to count the time to perform the rhythms right, and it can be very distracting and difficult to perform. But still, an atonal work can be a great musical composition, endowed with musical substance, expression and theatrical qualities. So it is not appropriate for me to answer this question directly.

Anton Rovner: *This is probably the best answer to such a question. Finally, I would like to ask you; do you have any plans for the near future in terms of performances.*

Rupert Bergmann: For a couple of years I have decided to have less performances in terms of quantity. I am not so happy with the present-day development of theater and particularly music theater, at least in the West, because it has become too ideological in its approach. Presently I am working on

a number of my own concert projects, as well as singing church music, which I do a considerable amount of. I am working on continuing singing the opera *Trygaios* composed by my Austrian composer and friend Werner Schulze, which is a setting to music of Aristophanes' play *Eirene*. I plan to perform it in September at the very fancy castle Schloss Weitra in the North of Austria. I still work with the theater with which I came to perform in the festival in Odessa in 1997, the ARBOS Musictheater. My next performance with them will be next Sunday, and I will perform a work titled *Die Störung* [«Помеха»] by Russian composer Alexander Radvilovich from St. Petersburg, set to the text of a mini-play by Russian avant-garde poet Daniil Kharms. This is a project which involves mimetic motions made by actors, some of whom are actually deaf and we

will sing it in the original Russian. I have many projects for next year partly because many of them have been postponed as the result of the COVID-19 pandemic. I will do a project in Hannover with a large assortment of composition, from Haydn to contemporary composers at a Jewish concert venue. I wish to come to the festival in two years from now, in 2023, and I am thinking of what compositions I would like to perform. I would certainly like to present once again a combination of two mini-operas, one them serious, based on Biblical themes, and the other one a comedy. I think that this is a most satisfying combination of oppositely contrasting genres.

Anton Rovner: *As I understand, you are also active in singing church music. Could you tell us about this?*

Rupert Bergmann: Yes, I also sing church music regularly. My parish is located in the southern part of Vienna. It is a Franciscan Pilgrimage Catholic church, and I am their regular lector and cantor singing the solo lines in the psalms that we sing from the Psalm Book as a regular part of the liturgy. Sometimes I also work as an organist there, either accompanying my own singing, or accompanying the parishioners for the mass. Since I am closely connected with the church, I am very interested in asking composers to write mini-operas on Biblical texts. For example, two years ago in the festival in Odessa I sang an opera by Bulgarian-Austrian composer Tzveta-Dimitrova Moses, in which I dressed myself in a costume resembling Moses and held a staff, for this piece I also was the librettist and wrote a monologue after the Book of Exodus.

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