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THE EMPEROR'S NEW WALTZ

Alma Deutscher wants to bring a turning point in Music

The young composer's new opera not only shows how well pop and classical go together, it also has a clear message.

One opera - three goals

She wrote her first mini-opera when she was just eight years old, and the second major opera by the 18-year-old composer has been running at the [Salzburg State Theater](#) since the beginning of the month. With *The Emperor's New Waltz* she is pursuing several goals: "First of all, I wanted to tell a beautiful love story, between two young people, but also between two musical worlds: classical music and pop music. Then I wanted to write a musical comedy that isn't only for opera fans, but also appeals to young people who otherwise have no access to classical music. And finally I wanted to parody the tuneless world of atonal contemporary music - music that only "clever people understand", explains the composer, with an ironic twist.

If you hear something that hurts your ears and sounds like noise, it's not because you're not clever enough - it's because it IS noise!

Alma Deutscher, composer

Noise or non-noise, that is the question here

As in the fairy tale "The Emperor's New Clothes" by Hans Christian Andersen, to which the opera alludes, she also conveys a message in the musical comedy: "The message is inspired by the fairy tale. At the end of the opera, a girl shouts about the waltz of the swindler: "That's just noise." I wanted to say, 'Listen people: you've been taken for a ride. If you hear something that's hurting your ears and sounds like noise, it's not because you're not clever enough – it IS noise!' I also wanted to liberate many composers who yearn to write beautiful music but who are oppressed in conservatoires and universities. I want to bring about the 'Me-Too' turn of beautiful music," explains Alma [Deutscher](#). By the way – Me-too and sexual harassment at a music academy are also addressed in the opera.

Shocking Nazi comparison

But while Alma Deutscher's message that one is not stupid if one does not appreciate dissonant sounds is actually liberating and seems more like an appeal to rely on one's own sense and one's own taste - instead of orienting oneself on the pretensions of others, some reviewers made harsh judgments and didn't even shy away from shocking comparisons, for instance, that the composer's criticism of avant-garde music is reminiscent of how the Nazis dealt with so-called "degenerate" Music. Strong stuff for a young composer with Jewish roots. How does she deal with it?

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Alma Deutscher, composer

Young composer - words of wisdom!

When asked about this, she says: “If I had been born 70 years earlier, the Nazis would have murdered me as a Jew, just as they murdered dozens of my relatives, including many children. So this insinuation wasn’t very sensible. I have expressed something through satire that many don’t dare to say out loud. That the old boys club of contemporary music is trying to silence a Jewish girl with Nazi comparisons only shows how scared they are of any criticism! With all due respect: this is not the reaction of people who are sure of their cause. And of course this assumption is also absurd: just because I make fun of cacophony, which perhaps Hitler didn’t like either, am I spreading Nazi ideas? Then everyone who loves Wagner is a Nazi, because Hitler idolized Wagner. And everybody who loves dogs must also be a Nazi, because it is well known that Hitler loved his dog very much. Come on! You have to be able to judge for yourself instead of always orientating yourself according to an old psychopath.”

[Trailer: *The Emperor's New Waltz*](#)



My dream is that young people go to a musical and then think: Actually, there was also opera in it and it didn't hurt at all, it was even nice.
Alma Deutscher, composer

Half musical, half opera

But back to the actual subject: with her opera, it is important to the British composer to reach a broad audience, so the proximity to musicals, which some critics criticized, is intended: “Actually, I didn’t want to call the piece ‘opera’, because it’s half-way between musical and opera. My hero Jonas is a pop singer, he sings songs on the guitar, he raps over Mozart. But at the end he also sings in a ten-part fugue. I wanted to show that opera and musicals are much closer than one thinks. My dream is that young people go to a musical, but then think: “Actually, there was also bits of opera in it and it didn’t hurt at all, it was even beautiful,” explains the composer.

Two genres, one world

After all, pop music and classical music are not that different: “For me it’s definitely the beautiful melodies that unite pop and classical music. I’m sure that if Mozart or Schubert had heard the most beautiful melodies of ABBA, or Queen or Elton John, then they would have been jealous and they would have said, ‘I wish I had thought of that!’ Pop music is of course simpler than classical music, but it belongs to the same harmonic world. In my opera, Jonas and Leonie discover this when they compose a song together.”

I'm sure if Mozart or Schubert had heard the most beautiful melodies by ABBA, Queen or Elton John, they would have been jealous and said: 'I wish I had thought of that.'

Alma Deutscher, composer

Audience-friendly music to save the classics

And it is precisely this power of melody that the exceptional British talent would like to use to save classical music from dying out: "So that an art form stays alive and doesn't become a museum of holy relics, you always need something new and fresh. But you need new music which speaks to people, which moves them, which brings them solace, which entertains them. And we haven't been allowed to have such beautiful new music for a long time. We were allowed to hear either old masterpieces or new noise experiments. But only audience-friendly new music can save classical music from extinction".

Clapping between movements ok?

Could it also help to relax the dress code and rules of conduct at classical concerts? "Of course it will help if you don't intimidate young people. As a composer and as a conductor, I really like it when the audience claps after every movement. But the most important thing is to present the audience with new beautiful music. I will be conducting a series of concerts in Vienna this year, with my own pieces. I'll talk to the audience, tell them about the pieces and try to create an informal atmosphere," reports the composer.

Of course it will help if you don't intimidate young people. For example, as a composer and also as a conductor, I really like it when the audience applauds after each movement.

Alma Deutscher, composer

Ideas for a new opera already here!

Alma Deutscher has also many plans for other projects - when asked about another opera, she says: "Yes, I already have ideas for my fourth opera (before "Cinderella" and "The Emperor's New Waltz there was already a mini-opera, *The Sweeper of Dreams*), but I don't want to give anything away yet. First of all, I would like to conduct *The Emperor's New Waltz* myself and create an English version of it and maybe make a film out of it. This year I will be conducting a series of concerts in Vienna - with my own pieces. And I would also like to take such concerts to other countries in the next few years - so there are many plans".

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