

Drawing close to the ideal

Performances and projects with the conductor Alejo Pérez in Antwerp, Ghent and Rome in the 2019/2020 season // A new chapter begins at Opera Vlaanderen



Alejo Pérez is the sort of conductor one can encounter everywhere – everywhere in the world, everywhere in music. He conducts in Antwerp, Salzburg, Tokyo and Luxembourg, in Madrid, Rome, Lyon and Buenos Aires. And the works in his repertoire differ from one another as widely as these cities do. His interpretations range from Mozart, Cherubini and Stravinsky to Gounod, Massenet, Bartók and Schoenberg. Operas, symphonic repertoire, chamber-music works – he can turn his hand to anything. It may seem driven and hectic when a conductor spends perhaps just 10 per cent of his working time and life in the place where he says he feels at home – in the Teatro Colón – but as Pérez stresses in an interview with the theatre magazine *Deutsche Bühne*, this “constant variety” is something he likes “very, very much”.

As of the coming season, however, there will be another place in the life of this 45-year-old conductor that he will not just visit occasionally but be able to leave a lasting musical mark on: Opera Vlaanderen in Antwerp and Ghent, where he will in future conduct at least two operas and three symphonic programmes in every season as music director.

Pérez says he immediately felt “a great affinity” with the ensemble, the Symfonisch Orkest Opera Ballett Vlaanderen, when he conducted it at the opera house for the first time, “and that is something you should not underestimate: the chemistry has to be right and you have to be on the same wavelength; that is essential for any artistic project.” The projects he will be undertaking in his first season are diverse and include two real heavyweights: Giuseppe Verdi’s “Don Carlo” in the five-act version, directed by Johan Simons (premiere on 19 September 2019) and Franz Schreker’s “grand magical opera” from 1932 with the title “Der Schmied von Gent”/“The Smith of Ghent” (premiere on 2 February 2020). Pérez has already conducted “Don Carlos” at the Teatro Argentino de La Plata, the South American premiere of this work in the original French version. Pérez is also familiar with Schreker’s musical idiom, having among other things interpreted the opera “Die Gezeichneten”/“The Stigmatised” at its French premiere in March 2015.

As Eleonore Büning wrote in the *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, what is so often highly praised in all of Pérez’ performances, including those mentioned, is his exact attention to detail and his “feeling for the overall structure”. He is “a theatre conductor”, the *Deutsche Bühne* writes in its portrait, and highlights a central characteristic of Pérez’ approach: while he remains open to the ideas and innovations of directors; he also persuades his partners to emphasise the music as an essential element of music theatre. “It is not important to me whether a director can read music,” Pérez says. But for him, he says, it is “very important that directors have a good ear for the music, that they make space for it, that the question ‘What is the music saying?’ remains important.”

Alongside the two debut performances in Flanders, another trip in the coming season is likely to be especially exciting in this connection: Pérez will be working with the Chinese artist and activist Ai Weiwei on Giacomo Puccini’s “Turandot” for a premiere on 25 March 2020 at the Teatro dell’Opera di Roma. It is Ai’s debut on the theatre stage. He will be in charge of directing, stage set and costumes, and will make this “Turandot” an opera “that plunges into the contemporary world, into the present-day cultural and political struggles that are depicted in Puccini’s story” – or at least that is what Ai said in a statement recently released by the opera house. The opera will run in Rome until 5 April, and the production already promises to cause quite a stir.

In this season, in addition to a number of symphonic concerts – including Mahler’s Fourth (30/31 May 2020), Stravinsky’s “Petrouchka” (6/7 June 2020), Tchaikovsky’s Fourth (4 November 2019), Verdi’s “Messa da Requiem” (5/8 October 2019), Ravel’s “Shéhérazade” (10/11 July 2020) – Pérez will also once more engage with unusual and experimental repertoire for the stage. From mid-June to the start of July 2020, at the opera house in Ghent, he will be conducting Igor Stravinsky’s “Le Sacre du Printemps”, which caused a scandal at its

premiere in Paris in 1913 – now a standard work, to be sure, but it will be partnered with Szymon Brzóska's ballet performance work "Noetic", written 101 years later. The work, premiered by GöteborgsOperans Danskompani in 2014, will be performed this time in Ghent by the dancers of the Opera Ballet Vlaanderen, with choreography by Sidi Larbi Cherkaoui. For the "Sacre du Printemps", it was decided to take a choreography by Pina Bausch. On 18 March, Pérez will be touring with his orchestra to Brussels' Kaaithheater with the works "Sinfonia" by Luciano Berio and Arnold Schoenberg's "Erwartung (Monodram in einem Akt für Sopran und Orchester)" in staged interpretations.

Pérez told the magazine *Opernwelt* that when he conducted such works combining stage and music – a ballet, a performance or an opera – he was mostly interested in achieving an equilibrium, "an interplay of control, balance and transparency." For him, the most important thing was "that the orchestra becomes a part of the whole theatre event". He has already been able to hone this concept of the *gesamtkunstwerk* while working in the past with different directors such as Peter Sellars, Pierre Audi and Krzysztof Warlikowski. But working with an ensemble and a theatre on an ongoing basis will be a great opportunity for him to optimise and reach this ideal. He himself sees "great potential" in this opportunity, he says, "in the long-term collaboration with this ensemble, with which I share the passion for music." He says he is looking forward to his time in Flanders with great anticipation and excitement. And all those who will encounter him there can do the same.

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