

True Colors

Tenor Michael Schade bids farewell to the Rossini repertoire with this season's Met *Almavivas*, but the self-styled Mozart singer is finding congenial lyric territory in works by Britten, Massenet and especially Strauss. HEIDI WALESON reports.



Photographed in Salzburg by Johannes Ifkovits
Grooming by Evelyn Rillé
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Michael Schade has sung more than 200 performances of Tamino in his time, but it's by no means the only tune he knows. Another frequent vehicle is *Almaviva*, a role he will be performing at the Met this month in Bartlett Sher's antic production of *Il Barbiere di Siviglia*. Schade means to put some spine into the feckless Count. "I want it not to be just a sunny, light, high voice, but to be sure that the audience knows that I'm the Count," he says. "Figaro does not control everything. And the end is heroic."

Schade calls himself a "Mozart singer who can sing Rossini," but he now plans to leave the latter behind in favor of weightier assignments: his current Met outing as the *Barbiere Almaviva*, a role once central to his career, is likely to be his "swan song of Rossini singing." Schade describes his recent Strauss roles — Leukippos in *Daphne* and Matteo in *Arabella* — as "like having a Mozart voice with a little turbo kick. *Daphne* and *Arabella* are high and loud. I approach it in a Mozart fashion — 'prima la parola, dopo la musica.' You have to know what you are singing about. I can sing with a big orchestra, because a conductor like Franz Welser-Möst is interested in hearing the words. It has to do with vocal placement and the intention of getting the words out, clearly, to the back of the hall. I've been blessed with great conductors, like Semyon Bychkov and Jimmy Levine — these guys don't grow on trees." And if one of those conductors isn't in the pit? "If I'm being drowned out, I walk out."

The Canadian tenor, whose parents are German, has always insisted on a schedule that balances opera, lieder and oratorio. Possessed of a flexible, lyric voice

and a strong dramatic bent, he is known for his expressive renditions of song literature (including a recent recording of *Die Schöne Müllerin*) and enjoys singing joint recitals with like-minded colleagues, such as Russell Braun and Thomas Quasthoff.

In recent seasons, Schade has ventured into dramatic Mozart roles, Idomeneo and Tito among them, seizing the opportunity to mine these complex characters onstage. Britten's *Death in Venice* and *Billy Budd* are on the horizon, as are the Prince in *Rusalka*, Nicias in *Thais*, des Grieux in *Manon* and Loge in *Das Rheingold*. Still, as Schade sees it, these new directions are an extension of what he has always done. "All music should sound like you are singing Mozart," he says. "There has to be a commitment to creating sound color and using the natural lyricism of the singer, the conductor and the orchestra to bring out the lyric sound."



As Tamino in the Met's *Die Zauberflöte*, 2000
© Beth Bergman 2008

When Schade considers venturing into new territory, he consults "myself, my teacher, my mentors," who include Ioan Holender, director of the Vienna State Opera, who heard Schade sing an audition in 1992 and hired him on the spot for an *Almaviva* the following night, replacing the indisposed Ramón Vargas. Schade has been a regular in Vienna and Salzburg ever since; last year he was named a *Kammersänger* by the Austrian government. Richard Bradshaw, the late conductor of the Canadian Opera Company, was also an integral figure. Schade says, "I would never have thought of doing my first *Idomeneo* or *Oedipus Rex* without him." Then there's Schade's teacher, Marlena Malas, who, in telling him to go ahead with *Oedipus*, said, "You've done the things I thought you would do and things I never thought you would do. You have to stay true to the color of your voice and work with the right people, who don't bury you."

He cites singers who have moved into new repertoire while remaining true to their voices. "Gösta Winbergh is one of my greatest heroes.

He became lyrically Wagnerian. A voice is like

wine. Some you drink now. Then there are reds that can keep a long time and get better — darker, rounder, richer — with age. There are some that don't last. And you can't make Bordeaux out of a Chardonnay."

Another central figure in Schade's musical life is Nikolaus Harnoncourt, a pioneer of the historical-performance movement, still active with his ensemble, *Concentus Musicus Wien*. Period performance was important to Schade's early career, when he worked with Trevor Pinnock, Roger Norrington and John Eliot Gardiner, among others. In 1997, Schade auditioned for Harnoncourt in Amsterdam. "I felt that I had looked for him all my life," Schade says. "He is one of those people who care, and not only about music. You look into Harnoncourt's eyes — they are like a barrel that has no bottom. He is a fiendishly hungry musician at seventy-eight, hungrier than a twenty-year-old." Schade, who named his son after Harnoncourt, has worked with the conductor on several projects, including the *Orlando Paladino* recording — on which he offers a wonderfully calibrated portrayal of the demented knight, driven mad by love — and one of Mozart's *Zaide*; in October 2007, he had a European concert tour with *Concentus Musicus*, singing Mozart and Haydn. "Haydn arias are underappreciated," he notes. "Haydn was a very global thinker — he looked well beyond the gardens of Esterhazy. Did you know that Nelson returned home by land after a big battle so that he could meet Haydn?"

Collaborating with Harnoncourt has deepened Schade's appreciation for historical performance, which dovetails with his own musical ideals. "Ancient music has cleaned up the lines in the more Romantic performance world," he says. "Take *Pelléas* — it becomes vibrant and forward, not mushy. I want my salad



Don Ottavio at Covent Garden, 2007, with Ana María Martínez and Marina Poplavskaya
© Catherine Ashmore 2008

crisp, with the vegetables interesting. In my singing, there's great emphasis on beauty of tone, and nothing is allowed to be pushed. Historical performance has taught me more about singing pianissimo and phrasing, about the bel canto ideal instead of can belto. Trying to rise above a big orchestra sound is very boring, rather like watching drag racing."

Born in Geneva, Schade spent his early years in Germany. In 1977, when he was twelve, his family moved to Canada. His musical upbringing was a potent combination of the old and the new worlds. The family spoke German at home and listened to a lot of Bach, and Schade attended a cathedral choir school. "It was wonderful. There were four choirs, and we sang Palestrina and Byrd in the Sunday service at St. Michael's Cathedral." Schade was very successful as a young singer ("I would get picked for tours"), but he had no thought of making a career in music — he wanted to be a veterinarian. However, the idea surfaced at the university, where he kept up his singing along with his science studies. "That was the first time I heard of people studying singing," he says. "I thought you have to have a voice like Pavarotti in order to be a professional singer." Schade won a major voice scholarship and switched from science to music, later joining the opera program at the Curtis Institute in Philadelphia, where he began studying with Malas. His professional opera debut was as Jaquino in *Fidelio* in British Columbia in 1988.



As Rinaldo in Haydn's *Armida* at Salzburg, 2007, with Annette Dasch (Armida)
© Monika Rittershaus 2008

That childhood "gift of musical heritage" was the foundation of Schade's need to balance his work among different forms. "When I started at Curtis, I'd be the only one to bring a Schubert lied to a master class," he says. "I'd want to coach *Elijah* instead of an opera role. I always refused to be just an opera singer." He sees his experiences of lieder, oratorio and opera as informing one another. "Bach would never have written the *St. John Passion* if he hadn't understood opera thoroughly. You can't do *Meistersinger* without knowing Schubert lieder — when David talks about the rules, look at how many times he quotes Schubert lieder, and how reminiscent it is of what the Evangelist does. And you can't do *Schöne Müllerin* without knowing the drama of opera." Schade makes sure that he is able to sing what he wants. "As a young singer, you figure the manager will do it all, but you have the responsibility to create the path," he says. "I've also been very lucky to find a manager who will respond to that and agree to a recital tour of Europe that pays less than fifteen *Aidas* in Verona."

Schade still has a house outside Toronto. He is loyal to his adopted country and proud of Canada's strength in the opera world. "Look around at world opera casts — everywhere you look, there's a Canadian. Gerald Finley, Ben Heppner — the list goes on." He is looking forward to singing in his country's new opera house, which he sees as Richard Bradshaw's legacy. "He refused to have Toronto be a little place north of New York."

Schade maintains a home in Vienna as well. His annual summer gig at Salzburg (in 2007, he sang Rinaldo in a raucous production of Haydn's *Armida*) is important family time for Schade and his partner Deanne McKee. Their combined progeny from previous marriages, plus their new daughter, totals eight children, ranging in age from seventeen years to nine months. "We take the kids to swim at the lake and ride our bicycles — we look like the Von Trapp family." The kids go to the opera too. When he sang Tamino in Washington, Schade's twins, then three-and-a-half, sat through the rehearsal and had a good time. "It's vital to invite them," Schade says. "When they see it, they understand why daddy has to go away." □

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