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Why does L.A. need its own summer classical music festival? For answers, look 6,000 miles away

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A tale of two exalted European city festivals begins with surprising signifiers. Conspicuously tacked on a press office bulletin board at the tony Salzburg Festival is a large photo of John Cage. The leading 20th century anti-establishment American artist is — at least in this small Salzburg dominion through which artists, writers and administrators regularly pass — a bastion of the classical music establishment.

At that other prestigious address for classical music in summertime, Lucerne, Switzerland, posters and program books are centered with the words PRIMA DONNA in large type, the I being a graphic of a conductor's baton extending from the manicured red nail of a lady's right hand, which is encircled by bees. This year's theme of the Lucerne festival is the empowerment of women in classical music, particularly as composers and conductors.

Outside observers have found such queen bee business a wee bit condescending, but given that parts of Switzerland gave women the vote only in the 1970s, this is a statement. So too is the fact that the artistic director designate of the Salzburg Festival is Austrian pianist Markus Hinterhäuser, a modern music specialist known for his penetrating recordings of John Cage's New York School.

Social progress can seem slow in this part of the world. Tradition and history weigh heavily on Switzerland and particularly Austria, where you occasionally encounter opera goers in lederhosen.

Standard repertory and standard stars prevail as they always have in both places. Audiences remain well-heeled. As always, the festivals cater to the classical music business; it can be as easy to run into an orchestra manager or artist's representative in Salzburg or Lucerne as it is a movie producer in Cannes.

Still something startling is in the air. Lucerne celebrated its 75th anniversary in 2013 with the theme "Viva la Revolución" and festival honchos showed up for a gala event wearing Che garb. Salzburg has yet to announce next year's program, Hinterhäuser's first season, but Peter Sellars has said that he will be back at the festival for the first time in almost two decades.

Salzburg and Lucerne are special places. As destination festivals, they have lost none of their importance in the Internet age, however much our expectation is that anything that matters is immediately and effortlessly available.

Indeed the website medici.tv has a smattering of this year's offerings thus far, including a new production of Gounod's "Faust" in Salzburg and Riccardo Chailly's compelling performance of Mahler's Eighth Symphony with the Lucerne Festival Orchestra. As I write, I am listening on the BBC Radio 3 website to a London Proms broadcast of Mirga Grazinyte-Tyla conducting her first program as music director as the City of Birmingham Symphony Orchestra, and with a little imagination I can feel the excitement in the Royal Albert Hall.

But vicarious reality is really equivocal reality. I'm not there, I'm at my keyboard, half listening, fooling myself while allowing Grazinyte-Tyla's thrilling Tchaikovsky Fourth Symphony to help speed my typing.

A festival, on the other hand, is a concentrated excursion away from the computer and the quotidian. It needn't always be a special destination. The Proms, the Berlin Festival, Paris Autumn and Prague Spring and other city festivals are primarily for residents. A few small, out-of-the-way American cities have small destination festivals of note — Ojai, close to home, is one. But Lincoln Center Festival in July comes closest to a big international festival of the performance arts, and it has become less ambitious and less provocative than it once was.

What about Los Angeles? As the city weighs the feasibility of its bid for the 2024 Summer Olympics, let us remember what it meant in 1984 when L.A. mounted an Olympic Arts Festival that changed the complexion of performance arts in Los Angeles. Do we have it in us to do it again by, say, reviving the biannual Los Angeles Festival, the follow-up to the Olympic Arts Festival, which lasted only until 1993 and had ambitions to put us in the league with Berlin and Paris?

First, though, it might be worth considering how Salzburg and Lucerne did it, and how what they do now reverberates around the world.

The Salzburg Festival was founded in 1920 in Mozart's quaint hometown at the foot of the Austrian Alps to be an international outpouring of opera, concerts and theater from the leading artists of the day. The Lucerne Festival came along 18 years later in reaction to Salzburg having become far too appealing to Hitler and his SS contingent. So the adamant anti-Fascist Arturo Toscanini started a festival on the shores of Lake Lucerne at the foot of the Swiss Alps.

Both festivals enhanced their reputations after World War II with star conductors, notably Herbert von Karajan in Salzburg and Wilhelm Furtwängler in Lucerne. Recordings of concerts and operas from the festivals automatically had the stamp of quality. An air of exclusivity wafted over both places as new concert halls and opera houses were built and offerings became more lavish.

Today Lucerne, which is primarily devoted to concert music, has a budget of around \$27 million, while Salzburg, which produces opera and theater as well as concerts, boasts a budget more than double that.

That kind of bankrolling (most of which is private support) can, of course, lend an air of exclusivity, which both festivals have worked hard to lessen, while becoming much more expansive. And to that end, they sponsor education projects, foster emerging artists and

commission new work. In Salzburg the lasting contribution from this summer is likely to be the premiere of Thomas Adés' opera, "The Exterminating Angel," a work meant to challenge the very essence of status quo — shockingly so in its harsh depiction of stymied high society — which will now be done at Royal Opera in London and at the Metropolitan Opera in New York.

I was also stuck by the Salzburg debut of pianist Yuja Wang. She may be on the flashy side for the more conservative audiences, but she couldn't have been more modestly respectful — or daring — than to step into eminent Salzburgian shoes. At a legendary 1970 song recital here, German baritone Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau and Russian pianist Sviatoslav Richter, two of the most celebrated musicians of their time, performed Brahms' song cycle "Die Schöne Magelone." This summer, in the gilded great hall of the Mozarteum, Wang became the steady hand that saved overwrought baritone Matthias Goerne from his excesses and helped signal a new maturity for the 29-year-old pianist.

At Lucerne, a number of worthy women conductors — Grazinyte-Tyla, to be sure, but also the likes of the American big-band jazz leader Maria Schneider and the adventurous Canadian singer-conductor Barbara Hannigan — are getting important exposure. The biggest news, though, is likely to be the contribution from Olga Neuwirth, this year's composer in residence.

I heard a performance of her impressive recent immersive work, "Le Encantadas," in which the audience was surrounded by instrumental groups and electronic music from loudspeakers. It is a gripping evocation of the Galapagos, inspired by Herman Melville's voyage to the South American islands, that revealed an alluring and unsettling strangeness even one of America's greatest writers could not capture as well.

Now back home. Arguments could be made for and against Los Angeles becoming a major festival city. The Los Angeles Philharmonic, where Grazinyte-Tyla began as a Dudamel fellow and is associate conductor, does an exceptional job promoting young talent and commissioning new work. Schneider was a featured artist five years ago at the Ojai Music Festival; Hannigan will be its music director in 2019. Not all that serves as news on the European festival circuit is necessarily news to visiting Angelenos.

Moreover, much of what was new and exciting in dance and theater at the Olympic Arts Festival, which opened with Pina Bausch, the choreographer then unknown in the U.S., is now regularly presented by the Center for Art of Performance at UCLA and REDCAT. Even so, we are a multicultural city that barely scratches the surface of consequential work created in Europe, Asia, South America and Africa. For that we need a festival.

So what would it take? First of all, money. Michael Haefliger, Lucerne's visionary executive and artistic director, told me that if L.A. is going to present a festival it would require a large-scale, full-time operation.

Robert Fitzpatrick, the former president of CalArts who created the 1984 Olympic Arts Festival, said that civic enthusiasm is essential to doing something exceptional. "A festival," he said over the phone from Long Island, N.Y., "has to be a moment of discovery."

Fitzpatrick reminded me of the fights he had when he wanted to open his follow-up Los Angeles Festival in 1986 with a Canadian circus no one had ever heard of called Cirque du Soleil. They thought he had to be kidding.

For Fitzpatrick money comes once you have the civic support. Then-Mayor Tom Bradley threw the power of City Hall behind the L.A. Festival. That, Fitzpatrick said, opened doors to donors like Lew Wasserman and Barry Diller.

There is cautious talk coming from the Music Center about an ambitious summer festival, employing its underused-in-the-summer campus, Grand Park and, I would hope, a host of potential venues around downtown. But festivals must be big and bold to matter. Let the talk turn to shouting into loudspeakers at whatever volume is necessary to drown out downtown construction and penetrate the thick walls of the nearby county and city offices.