

# A testing night at the opera

Brainpower stretched in Berlin; Californians play it safe in London; zany dance in France

OPERA  
**IQ/Schau lange in den dunklen Himmel**  
Maerzmusic Berlin

★★★★☆

**Shirley Athorp**

An IQ test in eight parts, each longer and more complex than the last, is not necessarily what you expect when you buy a ticket to the opera. Add a shredder, the sounds of newspaper tearing and packaging tape unrolling, appalling hairstyles, dull questions and a warped sense of humour, and you have the basis for IQ. Enno Poppe's irreverent reflection on the nature of tests as applied to humans is a quirky addition to this year's Maerzmusik Festival in Berlin.

Poppe's music theatre work is always both whacky and cerebral, combining complex microtonal layers with a sense of the playful. IQ, staged at the Haus der Berliner Festspiele, also owes something to the tangled novels of David Foster Wallace. The tedium of the everyday is examined so closely that it twists in upon itself, like a word repeated so often that it loses all meaning.

Anna Viebrock's sets and costumes gently mock the tragic self-importance of fringe science. Like old sci-fi films, a look back at what earlier generations considered futuristic is inevitably cringe-inducing. To heighten the sense of general disorientation, Poppe has his instrumentalists acting, his actors singing, and his singers playing instruments, with all of them swapping roles with bewildering ease. The tester and the tested, the testing and the testy – all become increasingly tangled as the evening spirals to its anarchic close. The composer conducts. Poppe veers from jazz to variegated shades of atonality; his score and Marcel Beyer's libretto are acerbic and refreshing.

The cast and the musicians of Klangforum Wien must all be off the scale of any standard test, but they

wear their brilliance with nonchalance. IQ makes a mockery of navel-gazing. Have you ever wondered just how smart you really are? Have a little Poppe and get over it.

Both darker and more flippant, Austrian "Musicbanda" Franul's *Schau lange in den dunklen Himmel* (*Take a Long Look at the Dark Sky*), at the Sophiensaele, explores isolation and madness through the music of Robert Schumann and the texts of Robert Walser. In the course of a short, well-constructed evening of burlesque psychodrama, baritone Otto Katzmeier plays Freud to actor Daniel Christensen's tortured poet. Franul's arrangements weave well-known snippets of Schumann into a musical psychoanalysis of the composer's nightmares; the whole is in memory of French visionary Thierry Kazazian.

IQ first saw the light of day in 2012 at the Schwetzingen Festspiele, while *Schau lange* was premiered at the KunstFestspiele Herrenhausen in 2011. The centrepiece of this year's Maerzmusik was Philip Glass's *Einstein on the Beach*, which dates back to 1975. This year's festival has focused on not-quite-new music. A little more risk would go a long way; on the other hand, second and third airings matter too.

[berlinerfestspiele.de](http://berlinerfestspiele.de)

CLASSICAL MUSIC  
**San Francisco SO/  
Michael Tilson Thomas**  
Royal Festival Hall, London

★★★★☆

**Andrew Clark**

American orchestras are always welcome in London: they clarify what unites and divides us. We speak the same language – Mahler, Berlioz, John Adams – but inhabit different cultures. That much was substantiated by the San Francisco Symphony's weekend concerts in the



Shell Classic International series.

To the orchestra's credit, it played a substantial slice of home-grown music instead of the token Americana most US ensembles take on tour. Saturday night brought an Ives curio, a new Adams concerto and a piquant Copland encore – the latter coming after Berlioz's *Symphonie fantastique*. Sunday afternoon was devoted to Mahler, a composer closely identified with the orchestra's conductor, Michael Tilson Thomas.

The overriding impression was of an ensemble that, while expert at playing the notes, refuses to take responsibility for the music – a charge you could never lay at the door of orchestras in Berlin, London, Munich or Vienna. Time and again we were left admiring these musicians' corporate discipline and technical finish, while lamenting their methodically "correct" – and sometimes downright prosaic – engagement with the score.

They sleepwalked through Berlioz's "Ball" and "March to the Scaffold", robbing the musical drama of energy and intensity. As for Mahler's Third Symphony, they tiptoed through the first-movement march and treated the hymn-like finale with reverential respect. There was ne'er a hint of abandon. Yes, you could count the beautiful moments – all in Mahler's reflective passages, though not the third movement's offstage posthorn

calls, which sounded like an ordinary trumpet. The best thing about this performance was Sasha Cooke, the American mezzo whose resonant tone and intelligent projection raised the fourth movement to a different level.

How much the San Franciscans' temperamental disengagement is down to American symphonic culture and how much to Tilson Thomas – whose tenure has now run to 19 long years – is anyone's guess. What no one can deny is his pivotal role in raising the national and international profile of American composers. His choice here was nevertheless odd.

The orchestration of the third movement of Ives's *Concord* piano sonata was undertaken by Henry Brant long after the composer's death, and sounds embarrassingly slight, soft-centred and un-Ivesian. As for Adams's *Absolute Jest*, a single-movement concerto for string quartet and orchestra, the composer himself has acknowledged the difficulties involved in such a combination, and this performance by the St Lawrence String Quartet made me wonder why he persisted. The quartet blends too easily with the accompaniment and expends a lot of energy just to stand still. By the end, the concerto starts to resemble the very type of academic New England music Adams went to California to escape.

[southbankcentre.co.uk](http://southbankcentre.co.uk)

**Musical score:**  
**Klangforum Wien performs 'IQ' at Maerzmusik Berlin; below, Ballet de Lorraine dance 'Relâche'**

Kai Bienert:  
Laurence Philippe



DANCE  
**CCN-Ballet de Lorraine**  
Opéra National de Lorraine  
Nancy, France

★★★★☆

**Laura Cappelle**

The Nancy-based Ballet de Lorraine has had an erratic history, alternating between classical and contemporary dance since it was founded in 1968, and finally settling on – both. Fortunately its current director, Sweden's Petter Jacobsson, has the experience to bridge the gap – a former ballet dancer, he turned to modern dance in the 1990s – and the company's latest triple bill demonstrated his deft touch.

The programme opened with *Corps de ballet* by 26-year-old Noé Soulier, a ballet dancer who holds a degree in philosophy. At present, his talent lies more in concepts than choreography. *Corps de ballet* dissects the classical vocabulary in three scenes. Steps are performed in alphabetical order, then taken apart to leave only the transitions between bigger moves; in the final scene, a lone, expressionless dancer goes through the pantomime gestures of traditional narrative ballet. It is a dry experiment that says nothing of consequence about ballet.

Merce Cunningham's *Sounddance*, by contrast, is a choreographic crescendo that combines a tight structure with a giddy unpredictability. Its eight dancers emerge from gold drapes like a flock of birds on the first day of spring. Stretching as if lazing in the sun, they skip, run and cartwheel to a riotous score by David Tudor, gathering momentum with thrilling freedom.

The evening concluded with Jacobsson's delightfully bizarre reconstruction of *Relâche*, the "ballet instantanéiste" that Francis Picabia and Erik Satie fashioned in 1924. Jacobsson and Thomas Caley have achieved a convincing period feel, although the first cast is still grappling with the stylised humour.

*Relâche* is French for "no performance today", and the entire ballet is a spoof, from the lights blinding the audience in the first scene to bows taken to the sound of a honking car. A diva in a silver lamé dress leads the proceedings with men in top hats jumping in from the audience to provide a chorus line. They later strip to their pyjamas. Add to that the collages and riddles of *Entr'acte*, the film René Clair created for the "interval", and you have a confection as zany as it is charming, a disarming blast from the heyday of surrealism.

[ballet-de-lorraine.eu](http://ballet-de-lorraine.eu)

# Portrait of a misjudged master

VISUAL ARTS  
**Anders Zorn: Sweden's Master Painter**  
National Academy Museum  
New York

**Ariella Budick**

The prodigiously gifted Anders Zorn (1860-1920) squandered a portion of his talent, but what he left behind shimmers with sensual delight. Few people recognise his name today, though his stature as a painter of the gaudy rich once rivalled that of John Singer Sargent. Posterity has been unfair: Zorn deserves much more acclaim for the theatrical virtuosity he whipped into his portraits, and for his stupefyingly deft watercolours. The moment for his resurrection seems ripe, and the National Academy Museum has seized it by mounting a charming retrospective of this misjudged master. If only today's financial titans had a chronicler as sparkling and adroit as Zorn.

The illegitimate son of a brewery maid from the Swedish countryside and a German master-brewer who scarpred off to Helsinki, he grew up on his grandparents' farm. At 15 was accepted into the Royal Swedish Academy of Art in Stockholm, where he wowed his teachers and peers with his technique. "I perpetually heard the name Zorn mentioned, and it was enveloped in an aura of wonder and admiration, both for the man's phenomenal artistic gifts and for his whole original personality," a fellow student recalled.

In 1881 Zorn fell in love with Emma Lamm, whose wealthy Jewish family disapproved of her marrying a rustic with a dubious trade. The couple got secretly engaged, and Zorn set off on a four-year quest to earn her family's approval. He moved to London and set up a fashionable studio in Mayfair. Commissions began pouring in. In one of the finest of these made-to-order portraits a dapper fellow in a crisp striped suit complaisantly receives the tribute of Zorn's dazzling brush – and the demands of his earnest dog.

"He is sprawling comfortably on a soft divan," the painter wrote to his fiancé, "looking up from absorbed contemplation of the portrait of his girlfriend to exchange a glance with his dog, standing astride him and staring at him with bewildered eyes. The painting could be entitled 'Rivals.'" This fellow, a grandson of Commodore Cornelius Vanderbilt, was among the first Americans to recognise how adept Zorn was at lacquering new wealth with a veneer of delicacy.

Zorn balanced his subjects' need for validation against the joy of pure painting, just as he found a perfectly pitched compromise between painterly abstraction and exacting realism. The magnificent "Mrs Walter Rathbone Bacon" also has a canine



**Dog day:**  
**'Clarence Barker' (1885)**

companion, but this collie's fur swells into waves of delight that dash upon the lady's dress. And more important than dog or dress are the feverish lavender, indigo and navy-blue shadows swirling across the floor and up the right half of the painting.

Sargent, Zorn's chief rival, had done a version of Mrs Bacon the year before, rendering her *à l'espagnole*. It wasn't one of his successes. Decked out in Spanish ruffles, she leans awkwardly against a wall as the flesh of her face curdles into a bilious yellow. Her brother-in-law, the railway magnate Edward Bacon, challenged the Swede to best Sargent by painting her again. When Sargent saw Zorn's canvas at the Paris Salon, he conceded that Zorn had won a "resplendent victory". Zorn may have won this particular contest, but he also made his share of paint-by-numbers duds. He couldn't animate the cardboard US President William Howard Taft, for instance, or breathe intelligence into Mrs Richard Howe. Then again, he painted some 550 portraits (at \$4,000 a pop, in 1901 dollars – more than \$100,000 today).

Like Sargent he regarded these



**Rustic: 'Midsummer Dance' (1897)**

deluxe commissions as his day job; what he really wanted to do was paint watercolours. In his time off, he did – among them a radiant view of the fish market in St Ives, Cornwall, where he and Emma (they did eventually marry) lived briefly in the late 1880s. Zorn steers clear of the picturesque: the corpses of immense fish sprawl across the beach, eyes bulging and mouths agape as if toiling for one last breath. Above the catch the fisherman's wife looms. We fix on the bulk of body pressing up against her clothes, and especially on broad expanses of exposed flesh.

"Those bare, blotchy red arms clearly absorbed most of the painter's interest," he later noted, with dry self-deprecation. Where Sargent's watercolours dabbled in delicate pleasures, Zorn's rejoice in crude physicality. His technique was always meticulous, but women's bodies swelled voluptuously beneath his brush. "A hybrid between a gentleman and a farmer," is how one of his wife's relatives described him.

It's easy to account for the total eclipse of Zorn's reputation. Like Sargent he was pushed aside by an unsympathetic avant-garde who labelled him a stylistic dinosaur and flunky to the nouveau riche. The generation of gilded Americans willing to pay record-breaking sums for portraiture was dying out. And there was little legroom for a peripatetic cosmopolitan in an era of surging nationalism. The years after 1910 were arid and lonely ones as Zorn saw his reputation wither before his dimming eyes.

It's a shame, though, that this proudly comfortable man didn't yearn more fervently for freedom. On the whole, his work is erratic and sometimes lazy, but the National Academy show offers glimpses of wonder. Viewers are left to wish he had charged even more outrageous sums for his bespoke paintings, and bought himself the leisure to pursue art that wouldn't sell.

To May 18, [nationalacademy.org](http://nationalacademy.org)

## CITY SKI CHAMPIONSHIPS & FINANCIAL TIMES ALPINE BUSINESS FORUM

CRANS-MONTANA, VALAIS, SWITZERLAND / 13<sup>TH</sup> – 16<sup>TH</sup> MARCH 2014

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JEANRICHARD Women's Champion	Annabel Fell-Clark	AXA Art - Lloyd's of London
JEANRICHARD Men's Super FIS/PRO Champion	Juergen Blumberg	BlackRock Asset Management
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Next year's Momentum Ski Festival will take place in Crans Montana, Switzerland, 12th - 15th March 2015. For details contact Amin Momen on 020 7371 9111 or [amin@momentumski.com](mailto:amin@momentumski.com)

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