

Sounds : heaven and hell

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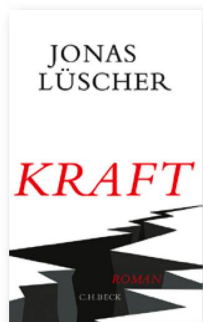
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A million-dollar prize



JONAS LÜSCHER: "Kraft".
C.H. Beck Verlag, 2017
237 pages; around
CHF 28.90

"Kraft is struggling. And as always, whenever the going gets tough, he escapes into research." It is not just the presentation he should give as a participant in a science competition in Silicon Valley that the professor of rhetoric from Tübingen is finding difficult. "Why is everything that exists good and how can it still be improved?" This is the question Richard Kraft has to answer. The incentive is prize money of a million dollars. This would allow him to get his life in order and to pay for his seemingly inevitable divorce.

In a little over 200 pages, we follow the professor to the USA to the prestigious Stanford University where he plans to write the

18-minute answer to the prize question over four weeks. He has left his second wife and twin daughters behind in Germany. Through flashbacks readers discover quite a lot about Kraft's past, his relationships with women and his friendship with Istvan, the pseudo-dissident from Hungary, who Kraft is now staying with. The dramatic climax of the novel will not be disclosed here.

After his highly acclaimed first work, the novella "Frühling der Barbaren", Jonas Lüscher's latest novel has been eagerly awaited. Using the first-person plural form, thus drawing the reader in, the story is sometimes told with a touch of irony and comedy, but at other times with distance. While the plot is interesting, it also seems very contrived. We find it difficult to identify with Kraft, the protagonist. The traits of this university professor, who champions market liberalisation and cheered on Ronald Reagan as a young student in Berlin, are too disagreeable.

The book can be read in a variety of ways – as social criticism, biting satire or as a philosophical essay. However, the long-winded sentences often seem stilted and require readers to concentrate intensely. The author set the bar high. Nevertheless, the quotations that precede every chapter and always make reference to the word "Kraft" entice people to read on.

Jonas Lüscher, who was born in 1976, grew up in Berne where he completed the training to become a primary school teacher. He later studied philosophy and carried out research as a doctoral student at the Federal Institute of Technology Zurich. Lüscher has been living in Munich for several years. His novella "Frühling der Barbaren" (2013) was translated into a number of languages and adapted for theatre. This novel, entitled "Kraft", will soon be published in French and Dutch.

RUTH VON GUNTEN

Heaven and hell



REGULA MÜHLEMANN:
"Mozart, Arias". Sony, 2016

When Regula Mühlemann was once referred to as the "Swiss Callas" by Swiss television, she felt "extremely embarrassed". She is nevertheless open-minded to media that reduce a highly promising singing career to two or three keywords. The tweeting soprano from Lucerne believes new social media channels allow other people to discover classical music. "I am of an age where it may still be possible to build a bridge to young people. Acting as an intermediary between these two worlds where possible is also part of my job." She was therefore pleased to sit down with the pop-star Beatrice Egli for a double interview.

Mühlemann was born in Adligenswil in the canton of Lucerne in 1986. She joined the ensemble of the Luzerner Theater in 2010 but quickly realised that she "needed air and wanted to become an independent artist". This was a risky step but she soon attracted the attention of big players in the opera world after shining as Ännchen in a movie version of Carl M. von Weber's opera "Der Freischütz". She performed minor singing roles all over the place in Zurich, Salzburg, Vienna, Berlin, Paris and Aix-en-Provence.

This splendidly light and smiling voice which exudes youthfulness can now also be enjoyed on CD. On her Mozart album she revealingly sings "Schon lacht der holde Frühling" at the beginning and creates little dramas out of the lovely verses as if to celebrate her coloratura skills in a fresh and cheerful way. The album then climbs Mount Olympus to the terrific concert aria "Vorreie spiegarvi, oh Dio": "Let me explain, oh God, how bitter my grief is." Mozart takes us through heaven and hell in six and a half minutes. Mühlemann lays bare her feelings on this emotional roller-coaster where many other sopranos simply go through the motions of singing the notes with detached technique.

"Not dramatic enough," may remark a senior critic who applies a century-long benchmark. The fact that Mühlemann is just 30 years old should provide a satisfactory answer.

The path has been paved. It would be astonishing if she failed to secure lead roles after lots of minor ones at major opera houses. Despite all the acclaim and glitz she still has to take this step. Perhaps she will soon be able to proudly repeat the line she utters with an A-major laugh: "I have a great responsibility on the stage and have to try to show the audience heaven, even if that may sound rather melodramatic."

CHRISTIAN BERZINS