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The art of failure



ANDREA FAZIOLI:
"L'arte del fallimento".
Ugo Guanda Editore, 2016,
288 pages, around € 18.

The private detective Elia Contini predominantly makes his living from finding pets and tracking down the culprits of minor thefts. Things become complicated when he is tasked with finding Mario, the co-owner of a furniture company, who has disappeared. Although the missing person soon returns to the family business, nothing can be done to prevent the company from falling into bankruptcy. A lunatic is on a murder spree in the company's environs. Both the Ticino police force and the private detective find themselves in the dark until the latter comes across the contentious issue of wage-dumping – low wages paid to cross-border commuters – in the course of his investigations. Could this be the key to solving the murders?

In his new crime novel, the author Andrea Fazioli is not showing the most attractive side of Ticino, the sunniest part of Switzerland. The lugubrious mood is captivating and keeps readers gripped right to the end. The violent crimes are appalling but they are not described in bloody detail. The blossoming of a tender love story helps to brighten the mood somewhat. No tourists appear in the story. The main characters are local people in their working environment and cross-border commuters from nearby Italy. The petty crimes, which Contini resolves in-between with the help of his "eternal fiancée", are cleverly interwoven with the murder cases in an almost symbolic way.

Fazioli creates the existence-threatening scenario of professional and private failure with great subtlety and humour. The original title in Italian is "L'arte del fallimento" ("The art of failure"). Detecting this art is left up to the reader. Stylistically the author focuses on dialogue and a neutral narrative perspective. This novel is quick and easy to read but will nevertheless reverberate with readers. Like all of Fazioli's crime novels, in which Contini is the rather eccentric but likeable main character, this one too cannot be consumed purely as entertainment and then put away.

Andrea Fazioli was born in 1978 in Bellinzona where he also works today as a freelance writer. He studied French and Italian at the University of Zurich and worked as a journalist in radio and television. A number of his novels have been translated into German, French and other languages. This crime novel will be published in German in 2018 by the btb-Verlag publishing house in Munich.

RUTH VON GUNTEN

Faith, love and hope



RACHEL HARNISCH:
Paul Hindemith,
"Marienleben", Naxos 2017.

It is not just when Rachel Harnisch sings that you hear lots of nuances. When the Swiss soprano talks about her life, she alludes to so much in so few words, revealing great highs and lows. "What I do has to sit right with me and my soul," she remarks. "At one time I was on the way to the very top but I struggled to cope with the pressure and superficiality of my profession and became ill." At that point, she wanted to give up singing.

The singer, born in Brig in 1973, had only just completed her studies in Freiburg im Breisgau when she became a member of the ensemble at the Vienna State Opera in 2000 in her mid-20s. Having only just arrived, she began receiving outside offers for major parts and soon left the famous opera house. After that, Alexander Pereira, the director of the Zurich Opera House at the time, asked her to join his ensemble. Harnisch declined the offer. She heard no more from him. Harnisch kept her composure as she had seen only too often how fine the line between glory and failure was at her level.

In 2013, shortly after Pereira left Zurich, Harnisch joined the opera house ensemble, which entailed a move to Zurich. This good fortune in her career did not last long, though. Her contract was not extended after just three years. However, a completely different type of happiness had now arrived in her life – her two children. They threw her career into splendid chaos – and helped to get it back on track. Harnisch sang the lead role in a major opera premiere in Berlin by the composer Aribert Reimann and was magnificent in a Janacek opera a year ago in Antwerp.

She has also suddenly started to release albums again, including the soprano solo in Mahler's 4th symphony and, most notably, Paul Hindemith's song cycle "Marienleben" ("The Life of Mary"). The idea for the recording goes back to 2012 when "Faith" was the theme of the Lucerne Festival where Harnisch fittingly performed Hindemith's work. In 2014, the magical sacred mood of Lucerne was then perfectly captured in the radio studio in Zurich. Harnisch powerfully interpreted the verses of Rainer Maria Rilke set to music and sang the songs with a virtuous and wonderfully tremulous voice – it can now be heard on her new CD.

CHRISTIAN BERZINS