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The vanished crocodile and other losses



MARTIN MEYER:
"Gerade gestern: Vom allmählichen Verschwinden des Gewohnten", (Just Yesterday: About the Gradual Disappearance of the Familiar), Carl Hanser Verlag, Munich 2018, 320 pages, CHF 36.90

disappeared over the past 10, 20 or 30 years. Things that were still there "Gerade gestern" (the book's title), just yesterday. An opportunity for Meyer, born in 1951, to reflect on the "gradual disappearance of the familiar".

"Gradual" is the key word with Meyer: sudden huge upheavals are rare in history. Changes in everyday life usually happen slowly, covertly, until one day you realise that something is just not there anymore. The pipe-smoker, for instance, whom one seldom sees these days. Or the playboy, who has died out – or at least the term is no longer used. Postcards, despite the smartphone and selfie cult, are still available as before, but how often do posted summer holiday greetings land in our letter boxes?

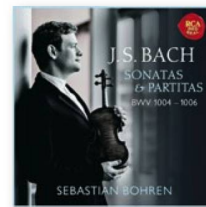
The object of each short text often serves simply as a springboard for precise observations of everyday life, for deep reflection. Even the North Face of the Eiger in the Berner Oberland gives Meyer occasion for existential analytical observations. Once the 1,800-metre-high rock face was "the perfect stage for horror fantasy"; countless tragic dramas had been observed by the public through telescopes and field glasses. But it is no longer the grand stage for mountaineers, at some point the North Face also "vanished". Mountaineers no longer struggle with the vertical over days, but thanks to modern equipment, ascend the face frequently in only a few hours.

Meyer is neither a cultural pessimist nor nostalgic. Yet the author cannot always conceal a touch of melancholy. But he has wrapped it in some beautiful text.

JÜRGEN MÜLLER

Once there were crocodiles on the Gotthard. They were not dangerous reptiles, but mighty goods locomotives. With their long, powerful nose sections, they were not dissimilar to the feared creatures. Seeing one of those monsters creeping up the ramps, bridges and spiral tunnels of the old Gotthard Line was "a special occasion": "The rotating rods produced a rhythmic hooting noise, the centre section appeared to be perpetually shuddering and shaking. (...) The lamps attached to the train's bogies scouted alertly." In the 1980s, however, the reptiles-on-rails had to give way to technical progress.

In his book, Martin Meyer traces in 86 brief texts many techniques, items, customs, manners, fashions, cultural aspects, figures of speech and phenomena of all types that have



SEBASTIAN BOHREN
J. S. Bach:
Sonatas & Partitas,
BWV 1004–1006,
RCA/Sony 2018.
Equal: Beethoven:
Violin Concerto; Mozart
und Schubert, Chamber
Artists, Sony 2015

Rising doubtfully to the top

He is fond of big words, which makes him seem pompous at times. Those who do not listen closely to violinist Sebastian Bohren, born in Winterthur in 1987, might even think they are faced with a master of exaggeration who has been given an extra dose of self-confidence. Nothing could be further from the truth. All his successes – including with his Stradivari Quartet and as a soloist – are the culmination of countless nights of self-doubt, something he does not hold back in conversation. But if a musician no longer doubts, he should no longer pick up his instrument. That will never happen to Bohren. He tries, triumphs – and dismisses the doubt.

This summer he debuted at the Lucerne Festival and recorded a solo sonata and two partitas by J. S. Bach: the CD is a pinnacle of violin literature – works full of simplicity and perfection. Bohren performs them with radiant self-perception. The tone is full, the stroke strong and the slurs superb. But one hears the doubt here, too: at one point he seems to get carried away only to quickly return more powerful and relaxed. It is as if he is asking himself: this could this be heavenly, couldn't it?

Three years ago Bohren took on another big challenge for violinists. At that time he threw himself fully into a CD recording of Ludwig van Beethoven's Violin Concerto, showing tremendous respect for the favourite work of all violinists and vast knowledge of all the recordings of his great role models Gidon Kremer, Anne-Sophie Mutter, Nathan Milstein etc. He succeeded in producing something fundamentally his own. To escape from the sterile atmosphere of the studio, the orchestra and soloist spent a week on the Rheinau music island. There they encouraged each other to deliver peak performances in front of the rehearsal audience. A satisfied Bohren stated, "You have to realise that there are people at work here for whom playing is a matter of life and death."

With all his doubts and musing, Bohren can clearly define his strengths. He knows that no one ascends to the violin throne by being modest. Those who experience Bohren in concert, experience an artist who performs with veneration, and precisely for that reason with such conviction. Bohren wrestles with the work, caresses it, quarrels and becomes one with it: every note is an act of adoration. This is true of the Beethoven CD just as the new Bach CD. This is not something that will appeal to those seeking smooth perfection.

CHRISTIAN BERZINS