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Keeping house with uncle



REBECCA GISLER
"Vom Onkel".
Atlantis Verlag,
Zurich 2022.
144 pages. CHF 27.
D'Oncle. Ed. Verdier,
Paris 2021.
122 pages. CHF 24.

It is quite the exception when an author publishes a book in two languages. Rebecca Gisler is one such exception. Her book "Vom Onkel" was first published in 2021 in French under the not strictly correct title "D'Oncle". This intentional slight error demonstrates her delight in playing freely and creatively with language. The same attitude is evident in the German version as well.

"Vom Onkel" is set in Brittany, in an apparently idyllic village on the Atlantic coast, where little happens and the nearby supermarket is the only attraction besides the local "Vieille Auberge" pub. The narrator and her brother are involuntary housemates, living with their uncle, a thoroughly lovable, corpulent character who suffers from increasing incontinence, bathes less and less, and strews litter about his room. The reasons for this ménage à trois remain as much in the

dark as other family secrets, whose vague outlines are shrouded in silence. Most of the time, a calm serenity reigns in the house and in the lovely garden that surrounds it. The pace only quickens once in a while, such as when the uncle has to be rushed to the hospital or the brother, unnerved, takes off a short time later.

Gisler relates all of this in an understated, peaceful book that is brilliant, above all, in its use of language. She packs her observations into long, intricate and beautifully composed sentences that glide gently along and resonate with readers instead of deterring them. Admittedly, her story does lack a certain edge now and then, namely because the uncle does not disturb neither does he provoke. The travel film about Switzerland and its chocolate delights, which the siblings watch because they were born there, also seems somewhat clichéd. Yet at the heart of it all, life revolves around the uncle. While everyone else turns away from him in disgust or exasperation, the kind-hearted narrator remains loyal to her uncle, which leads her to go searching for him at the end when he suddenly disappears – and finds him about to eat a seagull. The charm of this darkly comedic book lies in the unwavering empathy shown by the narrator, who is completely undeterred by her uncle's antics. This portrait "full of profound humanity" garnered Rebecca Gisler a Swiss literature prize in 2021.

BEAT MAZENAUER

A Frenchman is steering the Lausanne Chamber Orchestra into the fast lane



ARVO PÄRT:
Tabula Rasa,
Capuçon / Orchestre de
Chambre de Lausanne,
CD Erato 2022

It's encouraging to see how dynamic the Swiss chamber orchestra scene has become. Many have realised that simply performing is not enough; smaller orchestras, which are always slightly overshadowed by the major city symphony orchestras, need big names or at least very skilful management to remain in the public eye.

By way of example, violinist Daniel Hope has been bowing his way through the classical world with the Zurich Chamber Orchestra since 2016, while violinist Patricia Kopatchinskaja has been igniting the Camerata Bern with her infectious energy since 2018, and pianist David Greilsammer is taking the Geneva Camerata to new heights. The Festival Strings Lucerne and the Basel Chamber Orchestra also tour the world with famous soloists. And now Lausanne is also joining the party.

The Lausanne Chamber Orchestra wants to move into the fast lane. It could succeed, thanks to Renaud Capuçon, who has been its chief conductor since 2021. The French master violinist gained worldwide fame 20 years ago with his cello-playing brother, Gautier.

Be forewarned, however. In Lausanne, Capuçon is not the violin-playing "primus inter pares" who leads the orchestra as the concertmaster, as in Berne or Zurich. Capuçon is the actual conductor of the orchestra – despite the fact that the 46-year-old had never conducted before. How in the world did that happen?

Apparently, he has been waiting for this very question, beaming as he replies: "This is the door to a vast world!" He was already teaching in Lausanne and had performed with the chamber orchestra. He finally conducted it... and got the job.

The first concert was broadcast by ARTE, a month later they played in a prison. One thing is clear: the orchestra wants to play at new venues. Capuçon also attracted new sponsorship money to Lausanne. The orchestra has already released its first CD featuring "Tabula Rasa" by the Estonian composer Arvo Pärt, a piece as mysterious as it is enchanting for two violins, a prepared piano and string orchestra.

The 46-year-old is optimistic about the future. He describes himself as someone who chooses to follow many different paths – and always has. He marvels at those who perform, perform, perform, but he prefers to offer young people opportunities to get on stage in Lausanne. "That's the best thing you can do, help them to advance. If I only played concerts and recitals, I would grow sad."

CHRISTIAN BERZINS