Anna Netrebko Storms Salzburg, Classical Music’s Summit

**By**[**MICHAEL COOPER**](https://www.nytimes.com/by/michael-cooper)AUG. 22, 2017

SALZBURG, Austria — The curtain had just come down on Anna Netrebko’s highly anticipated debut as Verdi’s Aida here earlier this month. But her next performance was already beginning.

As the elegant Salzburg Festival audience filed out of the theater — the men in black tie and traditional Austrian jackets, the women in long gowns and dirndls — Ms. Netrebko was upstairs in her dressing room, changing out of her black wig, costume and makeup. When she emerged, she was blond and in a gala-ready black dress, and she made her way through a narrow hallway packed with well-wishers, managers, record company executives and fellow singers.

Plácido Domingo was waiting by the stage door to praise her performance as “perfection.” Ms. Netrebko paused to sign some autographs and pose for a few pictures and then left for the opening-night party in a nearby Baroque palace where Mozart, born just a few blocks away, once performed.

“Now I am blind!” Ms. Netrebko cried as she navigated a red carpet illuminated by television lights and paparazzi flashbulbs; her role debut was [front-page news](https://twitter.com/coopnytimes/status/898564038111576064) here, even in a local mass-market tabloid that had a picture of a topless woman inside. She swept into the gala through a side door, making her way through the palace kitchens, and took her seat in the glittering hall. There she joined the production’s conductor, Riccardo Muti; the rest of its cast and creative team; festival officials; and a table of leading Austrian industrialists for a late-night supper that began with [selfies](https://www.facebook.com/annanetrebko/photos/pcb.10156605406747627/10156605406567627/?type=3&theater) and dollops of caviar.

It was perhaps the grandest night of the summer at the grand Salzburg Festival, the Davos of classical music, which is known for attracting not just leading artists but also impresarios, managers, agents, recording-industry honchos, television and streaming executives, and journalists (more than 600 this year) to this small, picturesque city on the edge of the Alps. The hometown that Mozart once left behind to seek out the broader musical world becomes the epicenter of the classical music world each summer. But it is a world that is going through major changes.

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Impresarios still throng the festival, but these days they are checking out stars and also stagings — which are increasingly co-productions, shared among several opera companies. That is why Peter Gelb, the general manager of the Metropolitan Opera, could be found here at what he calls his “Salzburg office” — a corner table at the Goldener Hirsch hotel — having lunch with the artist William Kentridge, whose haunting production of Berg’s “Wozzeck” will come to the Met in a couple of years. Co-productions allow companies to pool costs; Mr. Gelb said that they also allow stagings to be fine-tuned before they reach New York. (Thomas Adès’s “The Exterminating Angel,” which had its premiere here last summer, arrives at the Met this fall.)

The recording industry is still a presence, but not like it used to be, when Salzburg was synonymous with thriving classical labels. Mr. Muti recalled that when he first came here in the early 1970s, posters of stars — especially those of the conductor Herbert von Karajan, a native son who reigned over the festival for decades — looked out from shop windows all over town.

“The first year I was here, I felt almost naked, because there was no picture of me,” Mr. Muti said. “Then there were many pictures, and I felt I had made a career.”

Things began to change when the iconoclast Gerard Mortier succeeded Karajan in the early 1990s and battled the recording industry, concerned that its commercial goals were polluting the festival’s artistic aims. Now the industry is back, but much weaker, buffeted by waves of disruptions: the move from CDs to downloads, and from downloads to streaming.

So when Mr. Muti attended a Deutsche Grammophon event at a chic art gallery here to promote his recording of Bruckner’s Symphony No. 2 with the Vienna Philharmonic, it was for a limited-edition vinyl LP — the kind of niche release that has proved successful with audiophiles. It is quite a reversal for a place that was once a compact-disc capital: It was here that Karajan held a [news conference in 1981](http://www.deutschegrammophon.com/us/album/karajan-dg-recordings/bio.html) to present the compact disc to the public, proclaiming “[all else is gaslight](http://www.nytimes.com/1993/05/16/arts/classical-view-beyond-cd-music-takes-a-back-seat.html).” Not long after that, he lured a CD factory to nearby Anif, where he lived.

The disc is not entirely dead, though. The next day, when the piano virtuoso Daniil Trifonov played an intimate concert at the same gallery to promote his new release, “Chopin Evocations,” a representative of Ludwig Beck, a Munich department store with a large, well-stocked CD section, was in the audience. But so was Jonathan Gruber, the head of classical for Apple Music.

The delivery systems keep changing, but there continues to be an appetite for new recordings, broadcasts and streams. While he was here, Mr. Gelb met with label executives, but also with Herbert Kloiber, the chairman of the media company Tele München, which distributes the Met’s Live in HD cinema simulcasts in Germany and Austria, its biggest market outside the United States.

“They’ve already sold 120,000 tickets in advance for the coming season,” Mr. Gelb said. And festival officials said that their telecast of “Aida” — “Prima Anna” was the headline on the cover of the local newspaper’s television supplement — was on track to reach over a million European homes.

Andris Nelsons, the music director of the Boston Symphony and Leipzig Gewandhaus orchestras, took a break between performances to discuss his next recording projects with [Clemens Trautmann](http://www.universalmusic.com/dr-clemens-trautmann-appointed-president-of-deutsche-grammophon/), the president of Deutsche Grammophon. Mr. Trautmann’s bifurcated background suggests the kind of skills the industry seeks now: He studied the clarinet at Juilliard, but more recently worked for Axel Springer, the large digital publishing firm.

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“We were brainstorming,” Mr. Nelsons said afterward. He recalled his first trip to Salzburg as a teenager — on a long bus trip from his native Latvia while singing in an early-music group founded by his mother. “We couldn’t afford to see the concerts,” he recalled, saying they had visited museums and the homes of composers instead. “We brought sandwiches from Riga.”

Ms. Netrebko has also come a long way since her first time here, when she was a Flower Maiden in a 1998 production of “Parsifal,” starring Mr. Domingo. Her breakthrough came in 2002, as Donna Anna in Mozart’s “Don Giovanni,” and she has been a major draw ever since. (According to festival lore, some of her sold-out performances were in such demand that desperate opera buffs were known to send blank checks to the box office.)

The morning after her second “Aida” performance found Ms. Netrebko and her husband, the tenor Yusif Eyvazov, at the Hotel Sacher, promoting their new [crossover album](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XBFAqJIwebk), “Romanza.” They were giving interviews to several German news outlets in the hotel’s deluxe Toscanini suite, while Ms. Netrebko’s manager, Judith Neuhoff, looked on.

Then it was time to film promotional videos for the album — one for Amazon and one for Apple Music, in Russian. Ms. Netrebko cast a practiced eye at the video setup and offered a suggestion. “Rule number one: for opera singers the camera has to be higher,” she told the cameraman with the assurance of a cinematographer. “I’m very experienced.”

When it was done, Mr. Eyvazov prepared to leave for Vienna to sort out some visa issues ahead of his coming international engagements, and Ms. Netrebko took a stroll through Salzburg, where some surprised tourists stopped photographing “Sound of Music” locales and others dropped their bosnas — popular local curried-sausage sandwiches — and began snapping pictures of her.

At a farmer’s market she bought some mushrooms and blueberries and, after trying a plum, surreptitiously handed one to a reporter. “I’m stealing these!” she said jokingly before paying Nina Allerberger, who ran the stand and who told her several times that she had seen and loved “Aida,” adding that it had been so beautiful it had given her chills.

Then Ms. Netrebko was off to Triangel, the bustling cafe across from the festival’s theaters, where she sneaked up behind the owner, Franz Gensbichler, and covered his eyes with her hands. “Anna?” he asked. (A dish of pasta with truffles there is named for her, and a steak dish is named for her husband.) She booked a table for the weekend and then, as a large crowd formed, decided to leave.

She ran into one of her former frequent co-stars, the tenor Rolando Villazón, who is appearing in Handel’s “Ariodante” with Cecilia Bartoli, on the street as she left.

“Here, in this city, in this time,” Ms. Netrebko said of the Salzburg swirl, “it’s crazy.”