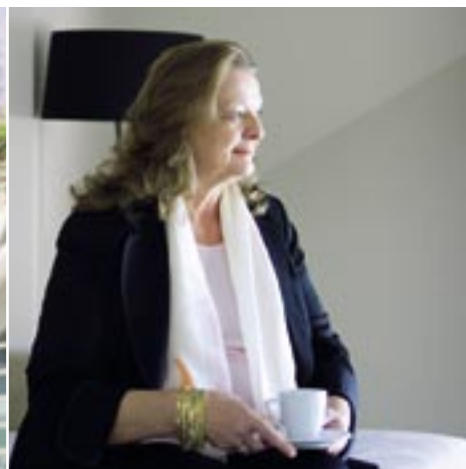




GREAT MOMENT



The Palau, housed in a striking modern design of concrete and ceramic mosaic, designed by Valencia native Santiago Calatrava, is a powerful, even overpowering, backdrop for anyone trying to create a musical centre from scratch. But Schmidt seems well matched to her surroundings.

Schmidt, now 65, initially didn't even want to consider the job when Valencian officials first spoke with her about it. After leaving Covent Garden, Schmidt – a self-declared perfectionist – didn't want to devote all the time and energy required by a full-time position. Instead, she was enjoying "a fantastic period" of life. Her time was split among the pleasures of "travelling and reading and devoting my time to my family", her husband, retired Italian opera singer Vladimiro Ganzarolli, and grown son, along with consultant work for places such as Amsterdam or London, which she was able to do from her home in Northern Italy or while travelling. But the Valencian officials were persistent, and Schmidt thought, "I've never been to Valencia before – why don't I just have a look at it. And that was the end of my freedom," she says with humor, "because I really fell in love with the project – I fell in love with Calatrava's extraordinary building."

Schmidt saw the building's model "and like in a flash it came to me that in this fantastic – extraordinary – building with four stages, one different from the other, I could try to achieve something which is rather unique in the world: to embrace all art forms under one roof and have music at the centre of it all."



For Helga Schmidt, "music, love of music, can contribute to the happiness of human beings". Although she has resided in Valencia since commencing her duties at the Palau in 2000, her love of northern Italy will never end. "I sometimes escape just for a day or two if I can: it's regenerating."

For Helga Schmidt, the intendant of Valencia's new Palau de les Arts Reina Sofia, the seeds of the work she's doing now – and the pleasure she takes in it – were planted in her childhood. Schmidt was born in Vienna, "but I started living music in Salzburg," she says, talking about "growing up" there, meaning where her life's passion first developed. "That's where my love of music started," when she was six and began to attend the summer music festivals with her musician father and mother.

That love of music led Schmidt to work as an assistant to the late conductor Herbert von Karajan, and then to preside as artistic director over London's Royal Opera House, Covent Garden. And now, since 2000, she's been trying to share her love of music through her vision of what a world-class opera house and performing arts centre can offer.

So Schmidt brought her experience and her contacts to Valencia. Long-time professional friend Plácido Domingo holds his Operalia Vocal Contest at the Palau, part of a training academy that will let young opera singers perform in Palau productions.

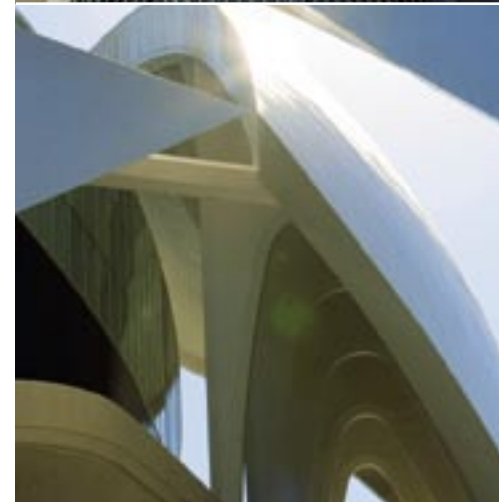
And, unusually, not one but "two of the greatest conductors of today" are involved at the Palau. Conductor Zubin Mehta opened the first full season in fall 2006 with Beethoven's "Fidelio" while he is also directing the Palau's annual lyric Festival del Mediterráneo as well as two of Wagner's Ring operas this spring. And the new orchestra was handpicked by music director Lorin Maazel and has already received invitations to perform in other prestigious venues.

Schmidt hopes the Palau will continue to become an outstanding reference point for international opera and music lovers. For example, she has persuaded long-time acquaintance film director Milos Forman to stage his first opera. Scheduled around those performances will be other activities including screenings of Forman's movies and a photo exhibition. So, Schmidt explains, people can visit Valencia for two or three days and enjoy a concentrated variety of programming.

Her office seems a testament to the fitting in of small pleasures, like the Espresso she enjoys all the time. The space is mostly functional, with little to catch the eye besides Schmidt herself – radiant despite fighting off a cold, clad in a top and scarf in matching shades of peach – and a couple of bright bouquets positioned to be seen from the desk. Music has long brought Schmidt enjoyment, and her latest work with it continues to do so, despite all the effort involved. Opening the Palau "is very, very hard work but I'm very proud and very happy that it is as successful as it has been."



Valencian native Santiago Calatrava spent over 14 years on the design and construction of the "City of Arts and Sciences" which houses the majestic Palau de les Arts Reina Sofia. The Palau, which opened in 2006, can hold up to 4,000 spectators.



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The Voice Commander of Valencia. Helga Schmidt has three great halls at her disposal, the world's most modern opera house, and Lorin Maazel and Plácido Domingo at her side. The diva divulges just how she manages to make the world of opera keep time.