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Ressort: Kunst, Kultur und Musik

Verdi's Otello

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Giuseppe Verdi's *Otello* stands as one of the crowning achievements of 19th-century opera, a work in which the composer channels the emotional intensity of Shakespeare's tragedy into music of striking depth and complexity. This performance, directed by Stefano Poda and conducted by Frédéric Chaslin, offers a fresh interpretation of the work, blending powerful visual design, masterful orchestration.

The performance is an outstanding cast that brings Verdi's vision to life with palpable immediacy. The production achieves a rare synthesis of traditional operatic grandeur with a modern, introspective approach that heightens the universal themes of love, jealousy, and betrayal at the heart of *Otello*. After a 15-year hiatus from composing opera, Verdi was finally persuaded to take on a new work in what was famously known as his "chocolate project," a plan spearheaded by his publisher Giulio Ricordi and librettist Arrigo Boito. This work would eventually become *Otello*, Verdi's penultimate opera and perhaps his most profoundly psychological.

Otello's character—a heroic yet deeply insecure outsider—is manipulated by his trusted ensign Iago into a descent fueled by jealousy. Verdi's genius in *Otello* lies in his ability to translate Shakespeare's words into musical forms that expose the raw undercurrents of human emotion. Every phrase and orchestral gesture resonates with a dramatic force that transcends language. Stefano Poda's staging is a feast for the senses, skillfully balancing the traditional gravitas of Verdi's *Otello* with a visually arresting modern aesthetic. Known for his cohesive design approach, Poda directed, designed the sets, costumes, and lighting, creating an atmosphere of fluidity and intensity that mirrors *Otello's* journey.

His production aesthetic is characterized by minimalism and rich symbolism, allowing the audience to focus on the characters' psychological depth. Poda's direction intensifies the emotional impact of the opera, drawing the audience into a world of shadows, illusions, and psychological turbulence. The set is an evocative space dominated by stark contrasts, emphasizing *Otello's* feelings of isolation and alienation. Tall, monolithic structures form a rigid and oppressive backdrop, reminiscent of both the grandeur of military fortresses and the emotional walls surrounding *Otello*. The set pieces create a sense of entrapment, underscoring the inescapable web woven around him by Iago's machinations.

Poda's use of light and shadow is particularly effective in portraying the theme of jealousy as a dark, lurking force. The lighting emphasizes *Otello's* transformation, shifting from warm tones that signify love

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and trust to harsher, cooler hues as his doubt and rage build. The costuming is elegantly understated, featuring a muted color palette that highlights Otello's status as an outsider. His dark, richly textured attire contrasts with the lighter costumes of the Venetian characters, underscoring his isolation. Desdemona's ethereal costume, on the other hand, symbolizes purity and innocence, further contrasting with Otello's darkness as he succumbs to jealousy.

Poda's attention to these visual details makes each scene feel like a painting, contributing to the overall psychological depth of the production. Conductor Frédéric Chaslin brings out the full emotional scope of Verdi's score with remarkable sensitivity and vigor. His interpretation captures the ebb and flow of tension within the music, maintaining a dynamic balance between the orchestra and the singers. Chaslin's approach is one of nuanced restraint; he allows Verdi's intense orchestration to shine without overwhelming the singers, and the result is an almost visceral experience. His control over dynamics and tempo is impressive, keeping the listener engaged in the dramatic arc from the first storm to Otello's tragic end.

The opening storm scene is a tour de force under Chaslin's baton. The orchestra explodes into action with a ferocity that immediately transports the audience into the world of the play. Chaslin's precise control allows each section of the orchestra to shine, creating a layered and immersive soundscape. This stormy introduction sets the stage for the emotional tempest to come, foreshadowing Otello's inner turmoil. Chaslin sustains the tension throughout, masterfully guiding the orchestra through the contrasting moods of the score—from the tender love duet between Otello and Desdemona to the sinister machinations of Iago's "Credo."

In the title role, Hovhannes Ayvazian delivers a powerhouse performance that captures both Otello's heroic stature and his tragic vulnerability. Ayvazian's portrayal of Otello is nuanced, revealing the general as a man caught between his military prowess and the insecurities that plague him as an outsider. His voice possesses a resonant warmth, yet he is equally capable of unleashing the darker, guttural tones that convey Otello's growing sense of betrayal and despair. Ayvazian's performance is remarkable for its emotional range, as he shifts seamlessly from tenderness in the love duet with Desdemona to volcanic rage in the climactic scenes of Act III.

Ayvazian's interpretation of Otello's jealousy is particularly compelling. He avoids the stereotypical portrayal of the jealous husband, instead presenting a more complex figure—a man deeply wounded by his perception of betrayal and driven to madness by his inability to reconcile his love and his mistrust. This depth brings Otello's tragedy into sharper focus, making his ultimate fall all the more heartbreaking. His performance in the final act, where he succumbs to his fatal flaw, is both harrowing and profoundly moving. Ayvazian's Otello is not a caricature of jealousy; he is a fully realized character whose tragedy feels personal and relatable.

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As Desdemona, Gabriella Létay Kiss brings a delicate yet powerful presence to the stage. Her portrayal of Otello's innocent wife is marked by a radiant purity that makes her character's fate all the more heartrending. Létay Kiss has a voice of remarkable clarity, one that soars effortlessly through Verdi's melodic lines with a beautiful, bell-like tone. Her Desdemona is portrayed as a figure of unblemished goodness, a beacon of love that contrasts sharply with Otello's consuming darkness.

The "Willow Song" and "Ave Maria" in Act IV are Létay Kiss's defining moments. Her rendition of these pieces is breathtaking, capturing Desdemona's innocence and sorrow with heartbreaking sensitivity. The "Willow Song," in particular, resonates with an ethereal fragility, as if Desdemona's soul is already preparing to leave this world. Létay Kiss's phrasing and control are impeccable, and she infuses each note with a sense of foreboding that underscores Desdemona's premonition of her impending death. Her "Ave Maria" is tender and sublime, bringing a poignant stillness to the scene that contrasts with the emotional turmoil surrounding her. In this role, Létay Kiss elevates Desdemona to a figure of tragic beauty.

The supporting cast and ensemble play crucial roles in bringing Poda's vision to life. As Iago, Otello's deceitful ensign, the baritone delivers a chilling performance, embodying the venomous cunning that drives the tragedy forward. His "Credo" aria is delivered with a dark, sardonic intensity that highlights Iago's nihilism and malice. His manipulation of Otello is both subtle and insidious, a portrayal that emphasizes Iago's role as a master manipulator rather than a mere antagonist.

The chorus, too, deserves special mention. They bring a sense of grandeur to the production, serving as the voice of Venetian society that both adulates and alienates Otello. Their choral interjections punctuate the action, reinforcing Otello's sense of isolation and the underlying tension between his public and private identities. Under Chaslin's guidance, the chorus delivers a powerful, cohesive performance that enhances the production's dramatic impact.

This production of Otello is a masterclass in operatic storytelling. Stefano Poda's direction, combined with Frédéric Chaslin's expert conducting, creates an immersive experience that is as visually stunning as it is musically compelling. Ayvaziyan and Létay Kiss shine in their roles, bringing Verdi's characters to life with depth and sensitivity. Together, they craft a portrayal of Otello that resonates on multiple levels—as a tale of love and betrayal, as a critique of societal prejudice, and as a tragic exploration of human vulnerability.

Verdi's Otello is more than an opera; it is a study of the human psyche, a work that delves into the destructive power of jealousy and the tragic consequences of mistrust. This production encapsulates all that makes Otello one of Verdi's masterpieces, presenting the story in a way that feels both timeless and strikingly relevant. By emphasizing Otello's status as an outsider and framing his jealousy as a response to

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both societal pressures and personal insecurities, Poda's direction offers a fresh perspective that speaks to contemporary audiences. In sum, this production of Otello is a triumph, a deeply moving and thought-provoking performance that captures the full scope of Verdi's genius.

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