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Ressort: Kunst, Kultur und Musik

A Masterful Odyssey Reimagined

Vienna State Opera, 10.12.2024 [ENA]

Claudio Monteverdi's *Il ritorno d'Ulisse in patria* is a work of profound depth, an operatic gem that bridges ancient myth with the vulnerabilities of the human condition. This latest production, featuring an exceptional ensemble under the musical direction of Pablo Heras-Casado and the visionary stage direction of Jossi Wieler and Sergio Morabito, is nothing short of a revelation.

By bringing a fresh lens to Monteverdi's late masterpiece, the production not only honors the composer's genius but also illuminates its enduring relevance in today's world. Monteverdi's adaptation of Homer's *Odyssey*, with a libretto by Giacomo Badoaro, starts where the epic's core emotional drama unfolds: Odysseus' (Ulisse's) return to Ithaca after 20 years of war and wandering. Yet, this is not a tale of triumphant heroism; instead, it's a meditation on human frailty, love, and resilience. The Vienna State Opera's production embraces this complexity, shedding light on the contradictions and emotional turmoil that define the characters.

From the opening prologue, featuring allegorical figures like Time (*Il Tempo*) and Human Frailty (*L'umana fragilità*), the tone is set for a narrative that prioritizes introspection over spectacle. Wieler and Morabito's directorial approach amplifies this focus, grounding the mythological story in raw, human emotion while framing it within the broader existential questions of our time.

This production boasts a cast of extraordinary performers who breathe life into Monteverdi's intricate score and Badoaro's poetic text. At the center is baritone Georg Nigl as Ulisse, whose portrayal is a masterclass in emotional nuance. Nigl captures the weariness of a man burdened by years of suffering, yet his voice radiates resilience and hope. His scenes with Telemaco and Penelope are particularly moving, blending tender vulnerability with a profound sense of resolve.

As Penelope, Stephanie Maitland delivers a tour-de-force performance. Her voice, rich and resonant, conveys the queen's quiet strength and deep sorrow as she navigates two decades of longing and the relentless advances of her suitors. Maitland's aria "*Di misera regina*" is a highlight, her vocal control and emotive power painting a portrait of a woman torn between despair and faith.

Tenor Cyrille Dubois shines as Telemaco, embodying the youthful optimism and determination of Ulisse's son. Dubois' lyrical phrasing and crystalline tone bring a touching sincerity to his interactions with both his

**Redaktioneller Programmdienst:
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Annette-Kolb-Str. 16
D-85055 Ingolstadt
Telefon: +49 (0) 841-951. 99.660
Telefax: +49 (0) 841-951. 99.661
Email: contact@european-news-agency.com
Internet: european-news-agency.com

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father and the goddess Minerva. Speaking of Minerva, Isabel Signoret is magnetic in this dual role, blending divine authority with a playful humanity. Her interventions, whether as protector or provocateur, are delivered with precision and warmth.

The supporting cast, including Daria Sushkova as Eurimaco and Adrian Autard in multiple roles, adds depth and dynamism to the production.

Special mention must be made of Antonio Di Matteo as Nettuno, whose commanding presence and sonorous bass voice perfectly encapsulate the god's vengeful ire. Monteverdi's score, a tapestry of contrasting styles and emotional shades, is brought to life with stunning vitality under Heras-Casado's direction. The orchestra, playing on period instruments, delivers a performance of exceptional clarity and expressivity. The continuo section is particularly striking, providing a supple, responsive foundation for the singers while highlighting Monteverdi's innovative use of harmonic tension.

The instrumental interludes and dance rhythms, so characteristic of Monteverdi's later work, are rendered with an infectious energy that underscores the opera's dramatic momentum. Heras-Casado's sensitivity to the ebb and flow of Monteverdi's music ensures that every note serves the unfolding drama, whether in the tender intimacy of a duet or the boisterous interplay of the suitors.

Visually, this production is a triumph. The stage design, minimalist yet evocative, juxtaposes the grandeur of myth with the starkness of human vulnerability. The set, dominated by earthy tones and fluid, shifting structures, mirrors the transient nature of time and memory, key themes in Monteverdi's opera.

The costuming is equally effective, blending classical and contemporary elements to create a timeless aesthetic. Penelope's regal yet understated attire contrasts sharply with the suitors' flamboyant garb, visually underscoring their intrusion into her world. Ulisse's transformation from beggar to hero is rendered with subtlety, reflecting his internal journey as much as his external disguise.

What makes this production particularly powerful is its ability to connect Monteverdi's meditation on myth and mortality with contemporary concerns. As Wieler and Morabito suggest, we continue to live in "mythical times," grappling with forces—both internal and external—that shape our destinies. This interpretation reframes the opera not as a distant, historical artifact but as a living, breathing work of art that speaks directly to modern audiences.

The exploration of human fragility, embodied in the prologue's allegorical figures, resonates deeply in a world still recovering from global upheaval. The themes of perseverance, faith, and the redemptive power of love are universal, offering a message of hope amid uncertainty.

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Monteverdi's genius lies in his ability to fuse music and drama into an organic whole, and this production exemplifies that synthesis. The characters' emotions are rendered with such immediacy that they transcend the boundaries of time and space. The opera's structure, with its alternating moments of introspection and action, is handled with such skill that its three-hour runtime feels almost ephemeral.

In his late career, Monteverdi was less interested in definitive statements than in posing profound questions, and this production honors that spirit of inquiry. By embracing the opera's inherent contradictions and ambiguities, it creates a space for reflection and dialogue, inviting audiences to engage with the work on multiple levels.

This production of *Il ritorno d'Ulisse in patria* is a shining example of what opera can achieve when artistry and vision align. It is a testament to the enduring power of Monteverdi's music, a celebration of the performers' exceptional talents, and a triumph for the Vienna State Opera's commitment to innovation.

Whether you are a seasoned opera enthusiast or a newcomer to Monteverdi, this production is an experience not to be missed. It reminds us that opera, at its best, is not just an art form but a journey—a return, much like Ulisse's, to the core of what it means to be human. Bravo to the entire cast and creative team for delivering a performance that will linger in the hearts and minds of its audience long after the performance.

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Annette-Kolb-Str. 16
D-85055 Ingolstadt
Telefon: +49 (0) 841-951. 99.660
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