



Ressort: Kunst, Kultur und Musik

Hypnotic Triumph: María de Buenos Aires at the Kammeroper

Chamber Opera of Vienna, 18.04.2025 [ENA]

Few works in the operatic repertoire pulse with the same raw intensity, sensuality, and poetic mysticism as Astor Piazzolla's *María de Buenos Aires*. The Kammeroper's return of its already legendary production, under the bold direction of Juana Inés Cano Restrepo, is nothing short of a triumph. A mesmerizing fusion of opera, tango, and surrealist storytelling, this *Tango Operita* grips its audience from the first haunt

It keeps audience while haunting bandoneón note to its final, electrifying conclusion. Juana Inés Cano Restrepo's direction is a revelation, delving fearlessly into the dark heart of Piazzolla and Ferrer's masterpiece. Rather than treating *María de Buenos Aires* as a simple homage to tango, she unearths its deeper layers—its social critique, its raw emotionality, and its haunting portrayal of a woman both worshipped and destroyed by the city that gave birth to her. Cano Restrepo frames the narrative with sharp, cinematic precision, transforming the stage into a living, breathing Buenos Aires—its streets pulsating with the dreams and despair of its inhabitants.

Anna Schöttl's set design is evocative yet minimal, allowing the tangled emotions of the characters to take center stage. The city is conjured through flickering shadows, neon-lit alleyways, and the omnipresent bandoneón, which sings of longing, loss, and defiance. At the heart of the production is Luciana Mancini's spellbinding performance as *María*. Her voice, rich and velvety, captures every nuance of the character's transformation—from the innocent girl stepping into the intoxicating world of tango to the tragic figure consumed by desire and ultimately reborn. Mancini's *María* is no passive victim; she burns with defiance, determination, and a deep, almost primal connection to the music that defines her.

Her vocal interpretation is breathtaking, shifting effortlessly between sultry intimacy and explosive power. When she sings, she doesn't just perform—she embodies *María's* spirit, drawing the audience into her world with every phrase. Her physical presence is equally commanding; even in the opera's most surreal moments, Mancini's *María* remains achingly real, a woman both sculpted by and rebelling against the forces around her. Matching Mancini's brilliance are Jorge Espino as the *Payador* and Daniel Bonilla-Torres as the enigmatic *Duende*. Espino's deep, expressive baritone lends the *Payador* a magnetic intensity, his verses weaving through the narrative like a Greek chorus, commenting, seducing, and lamenting in equal measure.

His chemistry with Mancini is electric, their voices entwining in a passionate, almost dangerous dance.

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Bonilla-Torres, as the raspy-voiced Duende, is the opera's ghostly, omnipresent conscience. His portrayal is both unsettling and hypnotic, his spoken-word sections delivered with an incantatory power that blurs the line between poetry and prophecy. He does not merely narrate María's story—he shapes it, twisting fate's knife with an almost mischievous glee.

No production of *María de Buenos Aires* can succeed without an ensemble capable of capturing Piazzolla's intricate, intoxicating sound world. Here, the Grazer band folksmilch exceeds all expectations, delivering a performance that is both authentic and daringly fresh. The bandoneón wails and whispers, the violin sings with aching beauty, and the double bass provides a heartbeat that drives the entire opera forward.

Unlike a traditional operatic pit orchestra, the musicians are an integral part of the production, their presence felt as much as heard. Under their hands, Piazzolla's music is alive—urgent, improvisational, and deeply infused with the essence of tango.

This is not a museum-piece performance; it is a living, breathing, rhythmically charged reimagining that captures the soul of Buenos Aires itself. Visually, the production is a masterpiece of contrasts. Lena Weikhard's costumes mirror María's evolution—her early innocence draped in soft, flowing fabrics, gradually giving way to the sharp-edged glamour of a tango diva. Franz Tscheck's lighting design is equally arresting, shifting from the golden haze of tango salons to the noirish shadows of Buenos Aires' underbelly. The play of light and darkness reinforces María's journey, both literal and metaphorical, through desire, exploitation, and ultimately, transcendence.

More than just a work of music theater, *María de Buenos Aires* is an opera of the soul, a piece that transcends its genre to become something wholly unique. This production understands that at its core, the opera is not just about María as a person, but María as a symbol—the embodiment of Buenos Aires, of tango, of passion and suffering and rebirth.

Cano Restrepo does not shy away from the opera's darker themes: the commodification of women, the violence of a society that both idolizes and destroys its muses. Yet, she also gives us a María who fights back, who refuses to be merely a specter of loss. By the time María reclaims her story in the opera's final moments, it is not just a narrative resolution—it is a revolutionary act.

The Chamber Opera's *María de Buenos Aires* is more than a revival—it is a revelation. It takes one of the most compelling works of the 20th century and breathes new life into it, finding fresh urgency in its themes, fresh fire in its music, and fresh meaning in its poetry. It is a production that seduces, challenges, and ultimately transforms its audience.

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For opera lovers, it is a chance to witness the full dramatic and musical potential of Piazzolla's masterpiece. For tango enthusiasts, it is a rare opportunity to see the genre's emotional depth explored on an operatic scale. And for anyone who believes in the power of theater to tell stories that matter, María de Buenos Aires is simply unmissable.

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