



Ressort: Kunst, Kultur und Musik

## An Operatic Triumph of Hope and Humanity

Theater Bonn, 22.06.2025 [ENA]

Theater Bonn premiered *Musik für die Lebenden*, a near-forgotten masterpiece by Georgian composer Gija Kantscheli, with a libretto by celebrated director Robert Sturua. This rare production, guided by conductor Daniel Johannes Mayr and director Maxim Didenko, is the jewel of the FOKUS '33 season—a visionary revival that transforms Kantscheli's sole opera into a compelling, timeless parable for today's world.

Kantscheli's opera, originally premiered in Tbilisi in 1984 and revisited in Weimar in 1999, has lain dormant ever since. Its rediscovery in Bonn is nothing short of revelatory. The production embraces deeply the composer's concept: music as a defiant, living force that emerges even in a shattered world. Sturua's abstract libretto, composed mainly of sound and fragmented language, reframes storytelling into sensory experience—an effect further amplified by the multilingual surtitles and minimal but potent staging.

Director Maxim Didenko's vision is both stark and symbolic. Galya Solodovnikova's stage and costume design maintain an eerie balance between ruin and hope—greyed ruins, collapsed structures, and ethereal light beams by Boris Kahnert recall both devastation and the possibility of renewal. Oleg Mikhailov's video projections hauntingly evoke memories of civilization past, while the strategic use of children and dancers by choreographers Sofia Pintzou and Alexander Fend brings kinetic life to the stage.

Mayr's conducting elicits a deeply communicative performance from the Beethoven Orchester Bonn. He shapes Kantscheli's "colorful sound tapestry"—from subtle dramatic underscoring to bold Grand Opera pastiche—with crystalline clarity and emotional precision. The live orchestral textures, alternating between intimate solo violin, full-choral grandeur, and playful waltz motifs, shine under Mayr's nuanced breadth. Ralf Rachbauer's portrayal of the Blind Old Man anchors the opera with gravitas and tenderness; his initial half-tone plaint becomes a beacon of artistic resistance.

The young voices—embodied by Valérie Ironside, Sofiia Kirdan, Clélia Oemus, and others—embody innocence and resilience in precisely executed ensemble moments. The Children's Chorus and Theater Bonn's adult chorus reach transcendent heights in the final choral apotheosis, embodying the opera's credo: music as moral strength in adversity.

The production unfolds in two acts of rising tension:

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Act I: Amid apocalyptic ruins, the blind musician teaches children to play. The abstract text and haunting sonorities evoke a world bereft of meaning—yet animated by human creativity and fragility.

Act II: Within a hospital troupe's staging of the “Love and Guilt,” an abrupt bombardment kills everyone—but the music returns. Emerging from rubble, the final ensemble and chorus weave melodic lines that transcend tragedy, ending in a gentle, choral “Und Gott war ein Lied.”

This narrative, subtly staged and emotionally layered, resonates far beyond its abstract form.

At its core, Musik für die Lebenden is a ritual of remembrance and renewal. With theatrical echoes of medieval mystery plays and modern allegory, it questions the place of human expression amid destruction. The waltz motif—a symbol of innocence, irony, and spiritual armor—reappears throughout, maintaining tension between lightheartedness and gravitas. One moment, music protects the old man from violence; the next, it unites a shattered chorus in redemption. In times marked by global strife, this opera stands as a moral testament: music is not escapism—it is resistance.

The production's success is owed to a constellation of devoted artists: Didenko's sensitive direction, Solodovnikova's purposeful design, Kahnert's chiaroscuro lighting, and Mikhailov's evocative video work. Dramaturge Polina Sandler roots the narrative in historical and cultural context, while Pintzou and Fend ensure physicality complements meaning. Together, they mount a deeply layered emotional and intellectual experience.

Since the premiere, each performance has drawn enthusiastic and contemplative reactions. The striking visual tableaux and powerful final chorus evoke thoughtful silence and glowing applause. As part of FOKUS '33—an award-winning initiative to unearth overlooked masterpieces—this production sets a high bar for future revivals, urging opera houses to search beyond the canon. The opera transcends conventional forms—no recitatives, no formal arias, no linear plot—making it a rare gem from the 20th century's margins. Sturua's libretto, fragmented and sonorous, dislodges the audience from narrative comfort and invites active emotional participation.

Theater Bonn's staging of Musik für die Lebenden is more than a revival: it is an urgent, resonant statement about art's capacity to endure and transform. Every element—from Rachbauer's vocal mastery to the luminous chorus, from Mayr's exacting conducting to the evocative staging—coalesces into a cohesive, emotionally indelible whole.

In a world still contending with conflict and fear, this opera offers solace and strength. It reminds us that music is not merely aesthetic—it is life itself. That is why Musik für die Lebenden is essential viewing: a

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majestic, moving affirmation of humanity's creative and ethical resilience.

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**Redaktion und Verantwortlichkeit:**

V.i.S.d.P. und gem. § 6 MDSStV: Dr. Nadejda Komendantova

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