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Ressort: Kunst, Kultur und Musik

Haunting Masterpiece: The Flying Dutchman

Oper im Steinbruch, St. Margarethen, 26.07.2025 [ENA]

Under a sky strewn with stars, the ancient quarry of St. Margarethen offers one of Europe's most breathtaking open-air opera venues. This summer, *The Flying Dutchman* (Der fliegende Holländer) by Richard Wagner, in its first staging ever at Oper im Steinbruch, transformed the rocky amphitheatre into a realm of myth, passion, and elemental drama. The performance was directed by Philipp M. Krenn.

It was designed by Momme Hinrichs, conducted by Patrick Lange, and featuring a stellar cast, this production was a dramatic and musical triumph—evoking thunderous seas, spectral longing, and redemptive love with rare artistic clarity. The quarry stage, carved by nature and steeped in history, proves more than a backdrop—it is a living character in this production. Its rugged limestone walls and vast open space, once used for stone in Vienna's greatest edifices, now echo Wagner's eternal themes of curse and salvation. As the sun sets, the natural acoustics and shifting light cast Daland's cliffs and the ship's deck in a primeval light.

This landscape feeds directly into the opera's emotional core, delivering a sensory experience that no indoor theatre could match. Philipp M. Krenn, a specialist in Wagnerian staging, deftly controls the dualistic forces of elemental dread and romantic redemption. The quarry's rugged contours become storm-lashed cliffs; its expanse harbors a ghost ship shrouded in spectral mists. Set designer Momme Hinrichs melds physical set pieces—rock formations, wooden decks, and shifting projections—into Wagner's mythic canvas. Costumes by Eva Dessecker balance period authenticity with symbolic texture: Senta in ethereal whites, the Dutchman in ghost-hued blacks, sailors and mariners in sea-worn textures.

Lighting designer Michael Grundner heightens supernatural moments with dramatic chiaroscuro, while sound designer Volker Werner ensures every whisper and wave crashes with thunderous clarity. Patrick Lange's baton draws out Wagner's seething orchestral drama and intimate lyricism in equal measure. The Philharmonia Chorus and Piedra Festivalorchester navigate the shifting tonal landscapes—from stormy Tempests to glimpses of love—with seamless dynamic control. Lange's pacing balances the hypnotic repetition of the Dutchman's curse and the ardor of Senta's dream, never allowing the drama to stagnate.

The chorus, under Walter Zeh, emerges from the cliffs like a chorus of fate—swelling in the tempest, hushed on the shores, crushing in massed terror. Their presence underscores communal anxiety and

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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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spiritual redemption with unanimity and passion. The role of Senta, often the emotional fulcrum of *Der fliegende Holländer*, was taken by Elisabeth Teige, whose luminous soprano and unwavering stage presence epitomized sacrificial devotion. Teige's interpretation blended youthful yearning with unwavering moral resolve, culminating in a climactic scene that transcended the ordinary. Her vocal purity soared over the orchestral swell, then transformative in whispered moments of personal mysticism.

Opposite her, George Gagnidze embodied the Dutchman with brooding intensity. His baritone delivered the spectral curse with nuance—torn, desperate, yet regally dignified. In dialogue with Teige's Senta, his transformation from haunted wanderer to redeemed lover was both vocally gripping and theatrically profound.

Johanni van Oostrum brought nobility and musical refinement to Erik, balancing doubt and loyalty. His duet with Senta in Act II was emotionally balanced and compelling. The mariner crew, including Brian Michael Moore and Jinxu Xiahou, infused every scene with windblown realism—shouting, tugging, responding to storms, and reinforcing the opera's rugged maritime setting.

Dramatic Highlights: Scenes of Storm and Salvation

Act I opened with bracing realism: effective offstage wind and rain, sailors hauling ropes, Erik's admonitions casting suspicion on the Dutchman's arrival. The quarry walls echoed with their cries. Senta's ballad rose like a plea, the chorus roared like waves, and the Dutchman appeared, pale and tormented—a figure of fatal destiny.

Act II deepened emotional stakes. The climactic confrontation between woman and curse unfolded over Senta's fantasy and Erik's jealousy. The choreography of light—candles and moonlight—against the cold stone highlighted Senta's growing obsession. The energy crackled at the reunion of hope and defiance.

Act III moved toward spiritual transformation. Senta's vow, Erik's regret, the chorus's tension—everything built toward the Dutchman's forgiveness. In the final moments, as Senta collapsed into his arms, the quarry felt swallowed by silence. A single ray of post-storm light broke through. Redemption was real.

What stands out is the unity between artistic vision and practical staging. Krenn's direction ensured that every design element—stone, wave, outfit, light—served both narrative clarity and symbolic depth. The production exploited the quarry's acoustic quirks: distant thunder, intimate whispers, the echo of choir and orchestra, half-heard from the hillside.

Audience immersion was total: spectators felt storm winds, glimpsed ghostly sails, heard the sea. Only in such a place could Wagner's elemental poetry truly unfold. The production proved that when myth is staged in nature's own temple, theatre becomes ritual.

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Since its inception in 1996 as Opern-festspiele St. Margarethen, the festival has prioritized fidelity to composers' intentions. Now run by Arenaria GmbH, it continues the tradition of grand-scale but emotionally accessible productions. Past highlights include Aida, Carmen, and Turandot. This season's Wagner entry reaffirms the ambition of the festival to match major international events—while maintaining local intimacy and natural grandeur.

The program's choice of The Flying Dutchman—a relatively early Wagner opera with direct emotional appeal and mythic resonance—is inspired. It sits perfectly in the quarry's character and succeeds musically and theatrically. As audiences depart, one feels they have witnessed not only opera, but a collective act of myth-making—where every voice, every wave, every star, matters.

Oper im Steinbruch's The Flying Dutchman is a tour de force of passion, atmosphere, and music. It is opera in its elemental form—where the voice becomes a plea, the landscape a character, and love a force of redemption.

The entire team—Krenn, Hinrichs, Lange, Teige, Gagnidze, van Oostrum, Moore, and more—have created something that transcends staging; it is ritual theatre, transporting, haunting, unforgettable.

If there is one summer opera in Europe 2025 that must be experienced, this is it: elemental opera at its most immersive. The quarry is alive. The myth is alive. And for one hot summer night, so is Wagner's music, breathed into life by art and earth.

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Annette-Kolb-Str. 16
D-85055 Ingolstadt
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