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Ressort: Kunst, Kultur und Musik

## Summer Opera of Heart and Brilliance: La Traviata

Oper Burg Gars, 26.07.2025 [ENA]

This summer, the Theaterfest Niederösterreich once again delivers a shining highlight with La Traviata at Oper Burg Gars. Against the historic backdrop of the Burgarena—an evocative setting that merges medieval architecture with operatic grandeur—this production, under the aegis of Clemens Unterreiner’s directorship, brings Verdi’s masterpiece to life with vivid emotional intensity and artistic refinement.

Oper Burg Gars remains the pride of the Theaterfest circuit—Austria’s largest unamplified outdoor opera festival. The open-air stage nestled within castle ruins offers not only an acoustic purity but a timeless ambiance that infuses the performance with authenticity. As the sun dips and atmospheric lighting transforms the old walls, the courtyard metamorphoses into Paris—an intimate yet expansive world where love and loss unfold. The ancient stone façades and the night sky form a dramatic frame, elevating every climatic moment with natural resonance.

Here, the venue itself becomes a supporting character: every whispered confession, every anguished plea echoes off ancient stones, enveloping audience and performers in a shared tapestry of vulnerability and passion. Clemens Unterreiner, in his second year as intendant, masterfully shapes this production with grace and theatrical insight. The decision to co-direct with Carolin Pienkos and Cornelius Obonya proves superbly synergistic—combining Unterreiner’s performer’s sensitivity with Pienkos and Obonya’s dramatic acuity. Their staging strikes a delicate balance: it retains Verdi’s rich romanticism while embracing the raw immediacy of modern expression.

The party scene in Act I, for instance, sparkles with youthful exuberance without descending into farce; the tragic decline in Act III unfolds with clarity and devastating restraint. Every gesture, every tableau, is thoughtfully conceived to resonate within the natural theatre of the Burg. At the core of this production is the luminous performance by soprano Hila Fahima as Violetta Valéry. Her vocal and dramatic interpretation is nothing short of masterful, bringing both emotional precision and vocal warmth to this iconic role. From the glittering optimism of *Sempre libera* to the soul-rending confession in *Addio del passato*, Fahima’s arc is breathtaking.

Her voice carries both the youthful luminosity and the fragility of a woman confronting mortality. In Act II, her subtle breakdown in the ravaged bedroom scene is cinematic—each phrase, each breath, a fragment of her inner agony. In Act III, her slow-motion withdrawal from life resonates profoundly, made all the more

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harrowing by the open-air intimacy.

Under a summer sky, Farnima's portrayal reminds us why Violetta remains one of opera's most human characters.

Standing opposite Fahima is Filip Filipovic, portraying Alfredo with clear Italianate warmth and youthful candor. His *De' miei bollenti spiriti* soars with sincerity, capturing the sheer joy of first love. His voice pairs beautifully with Fahima's, bringing honesty and tenderness to their duets.

Morten Frank Larsen, and alternately Unterreiner himself, brings depth to Giorgio Germont. Larsen's commanding baritone conveys moral rectitude shaken by love's reckoning. The *Di Provenza* aria is a standout—a father's heartfelt appeal rendered with genuine paternal ache. When Unterreiner steps into Germont's shoes, he brings an added meta-layer—as director and performer, his duality enhances the role's structural weight.

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In the pit, Levente Török directs a chamber-style orchestra whose transparent textures and measured pacing bring new clarity to Verdi's score. Without amplification, the instrumental ensemble resonates via the castle walls, delivering intimacy and grandeur in equal measure.

Török's approach honors Verdi's lyricism and drama, supporting the singers with balance and restraint. The party ensemble scenes bubble with life, the trio passages carry emotional gravity, and the final fade to silence in Act III feels organic and impeccably timed.

Chorus director Michal Juraszek ensures the supporting voices contribute color and vitality without overwhelming the more intimate moments, especially in duet and trio scenes.

Designer Devin McDonough crafts an aesthetic both elegant and utilitarian. The set is deliberately minimal—couches, chairs, a simple balcony—yet every planted prop supports character and story. The

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absence of grandiose scenery shifts focus to the emotional core, while rolling fabrics and strategic lighting suggest fleeting social grandeur.

In its simplicity, the staging captures Verdi's world—Parisian salons and sickrooms—anchored in essential theatricality: the absence of telegraphed excess, emphasis on what truly matters.

Costume designer Laura Madgé Hörmann delivers sartorial excellence across Acts I–III. In Act I, playful pastels and crisp tailoring evoke belle époque refinement. Act II's salon wear, opulent yet tasteful, reflects Violetta's social ascent and impending fragility. By Act III, music and costume merge—velvety blacks, velvet, austere textures, and understated accessories speak volumes of tragic withdrawal.

These costumes not only honor the period but illuminate character transformation—visual storytelling that enhances rather than distracts.

While the leads command attention, supporting performances deepen the experience:

Flaka Goranci and Andjela Spaic bring emotional support and gravity as Flora and Annina.

George Kounoupias, Nicolas Legoux, Philipp Schöllhorn, among others, round out the ensemble with finesse.

Clemens Unterreiner, doubling as both director and performer in select shows, proves adept in both capacities.

Their combined presence completes the operatic fabric, ensuring that no moment feels underpopulated—even without a full chorus

The audience's response has been electrifying—reviews call it "a weekend of superlative culture" . A sold-out premiere, enthusiastic receptions, and post-show applause echoing through the ruins mark the production's success. The festival's inclusive reach—hosting an audio-descriptive performance for visually impaired patrons—underscores its commitment to accessibility .

This empathy between stage and seats is vital. In the ancient air, shared musical breaths, common tears, and collective silences make for unforgettable theatre.

his production emerged during the Festival's 30th anniversary season—an astonishing milestone with over 225,000 patrons across 20 venues and 488 performances in 2024. La Traviata at Gars sits among highlights like Salome in Retz and Tosca in Klosterneuburg—testament to the festival's artistic breadth. Oper Burg Gars's La Traviata is a resounding triumph—musically accomplished, emotionally affecting, visually coherent, and theatrically resonant. Under Unterreiner's direction and supported by stellar vocalists,

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sensitive orchestral leadership, refined design, and festival-wide ambition, it stands as a crowning jewel in the 2025 season.

It's more than an opera; it's an immersive communion of history, art, and human emotion—a shared moment that lingers well beyond the final curtain.

For opera lovers, cultural explorers, and casual theatregoers alike: this Traviata is a heartfelt, majestic reminder that, even in an outdoor ruin, opera's power remains undiminished—and perhaps more potent than ever.

If this performance stirs your soul, don't miss the rest of the Theaterfest's riches—Melk, Klosterneuburg, Retz—and join the celebration of tradition and innovation under the open sky.

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