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Ressort: Kunst, Kultur und Musik

## Maria Stuarda: Bel Canto Brilliance Meets Modern Majesty

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At the Salzburg Festival’s centerpiece opera this summer, Maria Stuarda, Donizetti’s gripping bel canto drama, unfolds with remarkable intensity, vocal excellence, and thematic depth. Directed by Ulrich Rasche and led musically by Antonello Manacorda with the Vienna Philharmonic, this production framed the duel of two queens—Mary Stuart and Elizabeth I—as a symbolic and highly theatrical meditation on power.

It is also meditation on identity, and emotional extremity. Rather than bleak spectacle, it offered a vision of renewal—precise, resilient, unforgettable. Salzburg’s 2025 season—outlined under the banner “In my end is my beginning”—deliberately engaged with narratives of endings that bring new beginnings. Maria Stuarda sits at the heart of this ideological arc: a work that traces the final hours before Mary’s execution, and yet captures transcendence through resilience, dignity, and human connection.

Ulrich Rasche, better known for imposing theatrical installations, brings a striking aesthetic to Donizetti. His staging uses rotating platforms, strobe-like lighting slits, at times dense fog—painted in metal, glass, and spectral immediacy. He subverts expectations: no lush Tudor courts, but a ritualized, mechanical arena where power dynamics spin and shift. The choreography echoes state machinery: each movement is charged, each platform a claim staked.

Yet this is not cold abstraction. The emotional stakes remain resolutely human. The regality of both queens exists within a mechanical cage—a tribute to Rasche’s belief that gladiatorial clarity can amplify emotional truth—not suppress it.

Oropesa’s portrayal is luminous, both vocally commanding and emotionally vulnerable. Her bell-tone and fluid legato in “O Dio, che veggio” and the heart-wrenching clearness of “Regina! Ah! morir mi sento...” capture regal dignity and fatal resignation. Lindsey’s voice blends steely resolve and internal heartbreak. Her “Ah per sempre, ah mi lasciate” reveals a queen torn between Statesmanship and suppressed jealousy. Their climactic confrontation—two mezzo and soprano voices at full emotional blaze—is among the season’s most thrilling musical spectacles.

Their vocal chemistry—neither dominating the other—creates dramatic symmetry. As Rasche envisioned, the two figures orbit each other, distant yet mirrored.

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Bekhzod Davronov as Leicester brings charisma and lyrical projection, stabilizing the romantic subplot. Alexei Kulagin, Thomas Lehman, Nino Gotoshia, and other voices populate the court with precision, each expressing the manipulation, fear, loyalty, or conspiracy swirling around the queens.

The chorus and crowd scenes—omnipresent in Rasche’s staging—become both jury and mechanism: the people’s demands visible in strobe-lit chorus alignments echo political pressure and existential threat.

Antonello Manacorda’s collaboration with the Vienna Philharmonic conjures Donizetti’s score with transparency, power, and emotional nuance. The orchestra balances bel canto lyricism with Broadway-level punch: flutes, oboes, and strings swirl in crystalline embroidery while brass and timpani articulate political tension.

Manacorda maintains dramatic pacing—arias flow with hallucinatory color and momentum. The musical momentum never overwhelms characters; rather, it amplifies Mary’s tragedy and Elizabeth’s ambiguity.

Dramatic Arc: Emotional Highs & Sublime Aria Moments  
Act I – Allegiance and Alienation

Beech of historical detail disappears into stark, symbolic minimalism. The opening scenes with Maria’s imprisonment are mesmerizingly formal—and when she sings of betrayal, her voice liberates emotion from metallic confinement.

Act II – Voices of Fury and Grace

The famous confrontation—created fictitiously by Schiller and refined in Donizetti—becomes almost ritualistic in Rasche’s staging. Oropesa and Lindsey move in tight choreography, angular lighting amplifying psychological closure. The music pulses with ferocity—and the emotional catharsis is palpable.

Act III – Approaching Terminal Clarity

Maria’s final moments blend formal dignity and personal sorrow. Her death march, delivered in pure vocal line, is accompanied by quieting orchestration. Then a final spectral court tableau: rotating crowns lowered, symbolic exit of two figures—each separated from power.

Instead of despair, the decay becomes spiritual affirmation: her ending becomes a beginning.

The Salzburg audience responded with palpable energy: standing ovations, multiple curtain calls, and

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visible emotion in the stalls. While Rasche's initial style polarized some purists, as the evening progressed, vocal mastery and emotional immediacy won unanimous acclaim.

Donizetti's opera—often staged as a period belle-epoque affair—emerges here as modern operatic marathon: a psychological battleground in which voice is weapon, presence is power. Salzburg's Maria Stuarda doesn't gloss over execution or violence; it magnifies it through humanity.

In a festival committed to reflecting contemporary existential fragility, this production illuminates: endings become inquiries about identity, authority, and resilience. It shows how opera—the lyric, passionate, melodic art form—can inhabit modern aesthetic and moral ambiguity and still soar.

At Salzburg Festival 2025, Maria Stuarda achieves a rare thing: it reinterprets historic drama through bold modern aesthetics while preserving the full emotional and musical force of Donizetti's bel canto. Under Rasche's visionary staging and Manacorda's refined baton, Oropesa and Lindsey deliver performances of regal authority and human fragility. Their voices, perfectly balanced in confrontation and closure, mark a landmark production for the festival and the genre.

This is opera that challenges—but also uplifts. In the silence following Maria's final note, one senses possibility: even the darkest endings may open into fresh beginnings. That's a lesson Salzburg delivers not only in this opera, but in the very heart of its 2025 season.

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