



Ressort: Kunst, Kultur und Musik

Drei Schwestern: A Poetic Resonance of Longing and Renewal

Salzburger Festspiele, 09.08.2025 [ENA]

Presented for the first time at Salzburg, Peter Eötvös's *Drei Schwestern*—based on Chekhov's tragic drama—emerged as one of the most compelling contemporary operas of the season. This production, helmed by young director Evgeny Titov and conducted by Maxime Pascal (in the pit) and Alphonse Cemin (behind the stage), transformed the Felsenreitschule into a place of poetic introspection and existential longing.

Rather than staging a faithful adaptation of Chekhov's *Three Sisters*, Eötvös and Claus H. Henneberg reimaged the text in three distinct "sequences", each centered on one protagonist—Irina, Mascha, and Andrej—offering differing emotional angles and reflections on memory, loss, and unfulfilled desire. The opera begins with a haunting accordion prologue, evolving into a slow, dreamlike ritual danced by the sisters. This musical "reigen" invokes time's stagnation and emotional inertia with uncanny power. The structure of three overlapping memories deepens characterization while offering listeners musical logic in psychological density.

Evgeny Titov, rising as one of Europe's most sensitive opera directors, staged the work with extraordinary care. The production avoids metaphorical excess while capturing Chekhovian liminality: the setting is minimal, abstract, shifting light and subtle visual cues mark emotional thresholds rather than literal décor. Titov anchors the psychological complexity of each sister through movements, silence, and framing, often mirroring Eötvös's musical repetition. His use of countertenor voices for the three sisters and for Natasha (Andrej's wife) renders gender fluidity symbolic, aligning with the opera's abstraction and emotional archetypes.

The cast featured:

Dennis Orellana (Irina)
 Cameron Shahbazi (Mascha)
 Aryeh Nussbaum Cohen (Olga)
 Kangmin Justin Kim (Natascha)
 Mikolaj Trabka (Tusenbach)
 Yeiludolw-Paewo others in key roles

Redaktioneller Programmdienst: European News Agency

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By casting the three sisters as countertenors, Eötvös achieves an emotional abstraction that transcends gender, bringing a unified timbral aura to the trio. Orellana, Shahbazi, and Cohen each showed vocal nuance: Irina's fragility, Mascha's regret, and Olga's stoicism come through in haunting high lines. Natascha's mesmerizing presence cuts through domestic tensions with vocal authority.

The supporting ensemble—Andrei, Vershinin, Solyony, Tusenbach, Kulygin, Anfisa, Fedotik—inhabited their roles with expressive clarity, channeling psychological ambivalence in every phrase. The musical texture is split between an 18-player ensemble in the pit and a 50-player orchestra behind the stage, symbolizing internal state and outer world, respectively. This spatial arrangement supports dramatic layering and gives sonic dimension to the emotional landscape. Maxime Pascal expertly directed the pit ensemble, ensuring breath and instrumental transparency. When inner monologues surfaced in sequences, the foreground music floated—delicate, intimate.

Alphonse Cemin's offstage ensemble added epic resonance—filling the cavernous Felsenreitschule with shadowed orchestral response.

Eötvös's writing uses numeric symbolism (threes, tritones, variation) and leitmotivic associations for each sister: flute for Olga, clarinet for Mascha, oboe for Irina, etc.—giving the work both musical rigor and emotional symbolism.

Although many operas at Salzburg provoke strong responses, *Drei Schwestern* received near-universal acclaim for its musical subtlety and psychological clarity. Critics praised its chamber theatre aesthetic, emotional honesty, and music-theatre synergy. Even long-term opera fans found the abstraction deeply affecting rather than alienating.

Salzburg enthusiasts commented that though the staging demands concentration and emotional calibration, the result is “the poetic power of music made real”—a hallmark of the festival's ambition to innovate without alienation.

Dramatic Moments & Emotional Highlights

Prologue & Irina Sequence

Irina's section opens with elliptical intimacy: accordion, hushed lines, long silences. Orellana's voice trembles in confession. The interior of her longing and resignation is mirrored musically.

Mascha and Andrej

Mascha's emotional turmoil, sung by Shahbazi, confronts existential ennui and fleeting passion. Tussen

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scenes between Mascha and Vershinin gain depth through fragile lyricism. Andrej's section reveals betrayals and self-betrayal: his sense of aspiration shattered, delivered by a singing voice that veers between resignation and desperate regret.

Olga and Natasha

Nussbaum Cohen's Olga is contemplative and steady, the meditator of the group, while Kangmin Justin Kim's Natasha—high-voiced but visceral—embodies destructive domestic power. Their music underlines betrayal and disruption. The opera doesn't climax in tragedy but ends in existential rupture: a citywide fire reflected musically with sustained string tremors

This staging marks a turning point for Salzburg: a festival capable of holding contemporary music-theatre as central, alongside canonical repertory. Eötvös's *Drei Schwestern* isn't nostalgia—it's operatic reinvention, responding to existential questions with musical abstraction and psychological clarity.

Salzburg's programming—juxtaposing this contemporary opera with baroque, bel canto, and modern classics—demonstrates a bold commitment to dialogue across eras. Peter Eötvös's legacy, fulfilled posthumously here, crystallizes as a poetic force in the season's narrative of hope amid longing.

Salzburg Festival 2025's *Drei Schwestern* is a deeply moving artistic act. It transcends adaptation to become transformative: Chekhov's melancholy is re-imagined; Eötvös's music gives voice to what remains unspoken; Titov's staging dares abstraction without emotional destitution; Pascal and Cemin guide inner sound and outer resonance.

This production unfolds as an inquiry into memory and future, longing and paralysis. It explores how we live in the gaps between time—present haunted by past and desire for a tomorrow that never arrives. And yet, through music, we experience communal catharsis.

For lovers of contemporary opera and reflective theatre, *Drei Schwestern* is an invitation into radical empathy and aesthetic poetry.

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https://culture.en-a.eu/kunst_kultur_und_musik/drei_schwestern_a_poetic_resonance_of_longing_and_renewal-91893/

Redaktion und Verantwortlichkeit:

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

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