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Ressort: Kunst, Kultur und Musik

Freischütz: Romantic Opera Transformed on Water and Ice

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Experiencing Der Freischütz on the legendary Seebühne — the world’s largest open-air water stage on Lake Constance — is nothing short of magical. In 2025 this famous production by Philipp Stölzl returns for a second season, and it remains a vivid triumph of theatrical imagination, vocal distinction, and orchestral exuberance. Bregenz is more than an opera festival; it’s a natural amphitheater.

Its vast floating stage—surrounded by mountains and sparkling water—provides a breathtaking frame for drama. In 2025, this stage transforms into a haunting winter village: submerged medieval houses, dead trees, a sinking church spire, and a colossal skeletal horse skull — all under a rotating moon that shifts from grey to crimson. This kaleidoscopic dreamscape is not just scenic; it’s symbolic — evoking tradition, decay, superstition, and human frailty — the perfect container for Weber’s supernatural Romantic opera. Stölzl pulls opera into new terrain by blending fantasy and horror. Max, Agathe, Kaspar and the villagers wade through knee-deep water throughout.

The Wolf’s Glen scene evokes cinematic nightmare — swirling fog, flaming pyrotechnics, howling wolves, and the devil Samiel appearing atop trees, church towers, and skeleton horses. Staged with stunt and aerial movement direction by Wendy Hesketh-Ogilvie & Jamie Ogilvie, the production bristles with theatrical energy: divers vanish into the lagoon to forge bullets, water ballet illuminates Ännchen’s aria, and the final transformation feels ritualistic above flame-rings dancing on the lake. Although visually extravagant the staging is precise, enchanting, and unforgettable.

In his Bregenz debut, conductor Patrik Ringborg leads the Vienna Symphony Orchestra and Prague Philharmonic Choir to new depths. Critics hailed his interpretation as a leap forward in musical coherence and Romantic expression. Ringborg’s dynamic pacing reveals the emotional arc of Freischütz, balancing chamber-like delicacy with heroic, orchestral sweep. His integration of sound effects—the wolf’s growl, thunder rumble, mist whispers—emerges organically from music rather than forced add-ons. The Vienna Symphony gives a richly expressive yet nimble sound throughout. Ringborg and the orchestra preserve Weber’s leitmotifs, lyricism, and eerie tensile moments with flair and clarity—delivering music that honors Romantic tradition.

The cast combines drama, vocal poise, and stage courage:

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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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Thomas Blondelle (Max) guides the role with lyric tenor warmth. His Max is conflicted, vulnerable, and believable, even amid physical challenges on the water

Nikola Hillebrand (Agathe) sings with luminous purity. Her vocal line in the storm-tormented night scene comes with real emotional weight—though the heavy amplification occasionally competed with orchestral textures

Oliver Zwarg (Kaspar) is a show-stealer: his ore-rich bass-baritone and chilling stage presence define the opera's darker axis. Zwarg's Kaspar is genuinely unsettling, a devil in human form

Supporting roles—Ännchen, Kuno, the Hermit—bring vocal balance and dramatic function. Ännchen's aria on its floating platform is electronically delicate yet emotionally detailed

Samiel, embodied by actors Moritz von Treuenfels and Niklas Wetzel, is omnipresent: narrator, trickster, visual puppet master—driving the narrative as he haunts the lake with mocking commentary

Der Freischütz on the Seebühne runs for about two hours with no intermission. This unbroken flow intensifies dramatic immersion: from the eerie prologue of Max's failed shot, through the supernatural Wolf's Glen, to the final suspense-laden trial and the redemptive resolution. Dialogue is emphasised—Stölzl and Jan Dvorák extended spoken text to drive detail and pacing.

At a time when opera risks being confined to old repertoires and static decks, Bregenz's Der Freischütz reasserts the art form's theatrical potential. The production harnesses visual spectacle without compromising musical or vocal excellence, suggesting a future where opera can be immersive, cinematic, and deeply human.

Moreover, it illuminates Freischütz as German Romanticism not as museum music but as living myth—superstition, love, fear, redemption—played out in water and flame.

In an era demanding new experiences, this staging stands as proof that classical opera can still surprise, enchant, and connect on visceral and musical levels. It blends the grand with the intimate, the fantastic with the grounded.

It's opera as event and opera as feeling. Bregenzer Festspiele 2025's Der Freischütz is opera staged as spectacle and substance—an unforgettable fusion of Romantic music and theatrical strain, visually bold, musically masterful, emotionally arresting.

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Philipp Stölzl's direction, Patrik Ringborg's musical leadership, and a dedicated cast transform Weber's early Romantic masterpiece into a modern myth, played out on water and ice, haunted by superstition and redeemed by human courage.

This production reminds us that opera can still astonish—and still speak, across centuries, to love, anxiety, and faith. At Lake Constance, under the frozen moon, Der Freischütz becomes more than performance—it becomes pilgrimage.

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