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Venetian Masterpiece Reborn: Pompeo Magno

Bayreuthe Baroque Opera Festival, 16.09.2025 [ENA]

In the resplendent setting of the Margravial Opera House, the Bayreuth Baroque Opera Festival achieved a dazzling triumph with its 2025 premiere of Francesco Cavalli's Pompeo Magno. Under the visionary leadership of Max Emanuel Cencic, who served triple duty as director, dramaturg, and title protagonist, the festival unveiled what many hailed as its most ambitious production to date.

This "dramma per musica" (1666) by Cavalli stands out as a rich tapestry of political intrigue, emotional turbulence, and Baroque revelry, blending tragedy, comedy, desire, and betrayal in a way that embodies the very essence of early Venetian opera. Bringing such an intricate and seldom-produced work to life with theatrical flair and musicality was a bold gesture—one that the festival embraced with imaginative gusto and artistic integrity.

Cencic's production staged Pompeo Magno as a kaleidoscopic carnival of power and passion, mapping its dramatic labyrinth with bold colors, fast pace, and gambits of commedia dell'arte — all hallmarks of Venetian theatrical vibrancy. The combination of politics and carnivalesque chaos found perfect staging in the ornate, early-Baroque world of the Margravial Opera House, a UNESCO-listed gem that elevates sound and spectacle with architectural elegance.

That Max Emanuel Cencic oversees nearly every aspect—direction, vision, and performance—imbues the production with cohesive artistry. As the titular Pompeo, he anchored the performance with dignified charisma—bringing both authority and vulnerability to this legendary Roman general turned conflicted human being. Musical stewardship, entrusted to the renowned Leonardo García Alarcón and his Cappella Mediterranea, provided shimmering expertise and period-accurate energy. Their responsive, deft execution of Cavalli's score was note-perfect, vibrant yet intimate—qualities that brought out both the emotional depth and ornate textures of the composition.

Seamlessly populating Cavalli's intricate court, a stellar ensemble brought life to archetypes of jealousy, romance, and duplicity:
Sophie Junker as Giulia shone with graceful vulnerability.
Valer Sabadus, as Servilio, delivered agile lyricism with haunting emotionality.
Dominique Visse (Delfo), Marcel Beekman (Atrea), Valerio Contaldo (Mitridate), and Nicolò Balducci (Sesto) each offered finely calibrated portrayals—layering stylized gestures with lyrical precision

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More than mere voices, they embodied personas sketched in Cavalli's dense fabric, conveying both the gravity and the subtle comedic undercurrents of Venetian baroque psychology. The production's design embraced minimalism with intentional boldness—suggesting opulent reality without indulgence. Modest yet evocative costumes anchored the characters in their era, while lighting and staging further delineated dramatic shifts between the masquerade of power and the nudity of emotional cost. It was thoughtful design that helped define character, atmosphere, and narrative rhythm, rather than distract.

Leonardo García Alarcón and Cappella Mediterranea projected Pompeo Magno with authority and nuance—balancing dynamic sonorities and flexible tempi to support singers and underscore dramatic tension. Cavalli's sinuous arias, choral interjections, and instrumental lines sang with transparency and fervor, creating a dynamic interplay between voice and ensemble. It was a baroque performance radiating elegance and immediacy.

The revival arrives during the festival's conscious turn toward Venetian opera, exploring theatrical frontiers beyond the canonical scope. By bringing a 350-year-old gem back from obscurity, Bayreuth Baroque reaffirmed its reputation as a daring cultural incubator. In today's polarized world, the opera's interwoven themes—betrayal, clandestine desires, and public image—resonate with sharp contemporaneity.

Local critics heralded the premiere as "a sensuous, lustful Baroque spectacle". Observers noted that this might be the most lavish, thrilling production Bayreuth Baroque has presented. The packed house responded with enthusiastic appreciation, particularly enthralled by the vivacity of staging and musical precision. By staging Pompeo Magno, Bayreuth Baroque delivered its most significant artistic statement yet. As a festival still forging its identity, this Baroque festival leaped forward in ambition and execution. The production—and its standout creative team—not only invigorated Cavalli's music but confirmed that early opera, when enacted with intelligence and panache, speaks powerfully to modern sensibilities.

Pompeo Magno at Bayreuth Baroque stands as a triumphant rediscovery—where 17th-century music and 21st-century artistry entwine to deliver spectacle, insight, and emotional richness. Max Emanuel Cencic and team crafted a production that combined theatrical invention, singerly precision, and architectural wonder to bring Cavalli's richly woven drama vivid to life. It is, unquestionably, an essential landmark in modern Baroque revival.
For lovers of early opera, cultural heritage, and masterful staging, this is an evening to remember. Pompeo Magno shines not only as a recovered treasure—but as a vibrant theatrical event that confirms the continuing relevance and theatrical power of Baroque opera.

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