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Ressort: Kunst, Kultur und Musik

Falling into Sound and Light

Theater an der Wien, 27.11.2025 [ENA]

Unsuk Chin's Alice in Wonderland arrives at Theater an der Wien not merely as another new production, but as a statement about what 21st-century opera can be: sonically adventurous, visually audacious and intellectually sharp, yet still capable of delight and wonder. The Austrian premiere, conducted by Stephan Zilias and staged by Elisabeth Stöppler, confirms the piece's reputation as one of the most dazzling operatic re-imaginations of Lewis Carroll on today's stages.

Chin's score has already secured a special place in the repertoire. The Korean composer, a former pupil of György Ligeti and recipient of the 2024 Ernst von Siemens Music Prize, has always resisted being pigeonholed into a single "school". Her music is defined by colour, shifting light and dream logic more than by any fixed stylistic label. Alice in Wonderland, her first opera, compresses that aesthetic into eight scenes of kaleidoscopic invention, and the Theater an der Wien team leans into this with exhilarating confidence. From the first notes in the pit, the ORF Vienna Radio Symphony Orchestra makes clear that this is not a cosy children's tale, but a sonic playground where anything can happen.

Chin's reduced orchestration (created with Lloyd Moore) still feels enormous in imagination: percussion bristles, winds chatter, strings shimmer on the edge of audibility. Zilias shapes this complex sound world with remarkable clarity. Rhythmic traps and sudden stylistic pivots—swerves into almost jazzy swing, grotesque marches, fragments that echo film music or cabaret—are negotiated with the kind of precision that allows the audience to relax into the ride. The orchestra never overwhelms the stage; instead, it behaves almost like another character, teasing, commenting, sometimes confronting Alice as much as accompanying her.

Chin and co-librettist David Henry Hwang build the piece around the deceptively simple question "Who am I?", repeated and refracted as Alice tumbles through her encounters. Musically, that question becomes a series of transformations: vocal lines morph from nursery-rhyme simplicity to vertiginous leaps, harmonies slip from lullaby to nightmare in a heartbeat. The effect is that of entering a mind where nothing is fixed, least of all the person at its centre. The Arnold Schoenberg Choir and the children's choir Gumpoldskirchner Spatzen contribute enormously to the impact. They are not a polite background texture but an active force, erupting as jurors, fantastical creatures or disembodied voices of the subconscious.

Their accuracy in Chin's intricate choral writing, combined with a strong stage presence, adds both weight

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and sparkle to the evening. Visually, Stöppler's production is immediate and memorable. Working with set designer Valentin Köhler, she places the action on a revolving disc of undulating grassy mounds riddled with rabbit holes. At once playground, landscape and psychological terrain, this green world keeps turning under Alice's feet, suggesting that in Wonderland the ground is literally never stable. A striking early image sees Alice plunging from above down a shaft of light into this space—a staging of the rabbit-hole fall that feels both literal and metaphorical.

As the opera progresses, the apparent pastoral innocence of the set steadily erodes. For the Queen of Hearts' domain, the lush grass yields to a colder, industrial idiom: harsh surfaces, metallic structures, and a ticker-like strip displaying text of the libretto, turning language itself into a kind of relentless machinery. The visual shift mirrors Chin's musical journey from glittering playfulness toward something darker and more claustrophobic. Su Sigmund's costumes relish the opportunity to reinvent Carroll's characters without lapsing into cartoon.

Alice's look retains something recognisably "girl next door", but subtly distorted; the Queen of Hearts, swathed in sculptural red, dominates the stage like a walking monument to rage and caprice; the creatures of Wonderland—a twitchy Rabbit, an enigmatic Caterpillar, the grinning Cat—occupy that pleasing space where the fantastical feels oddly believable. Lighting designer Elana Siberski ties these elements together, using tight beams and sudden colour shifts to freeze moments of revelation, or to plunge the stage into a twilight where identity blurs. The visual language never competes with the score; it extends it, making Chin's preoccupation with light and shadow tangible.

Any staging of Alice in Wonderland stands or falls with its Alice, and here Theater an der Wien has a true anchor in Álfheiður Erla Guðmundsdóttir. Vocally, she brings a luminous, agile soprano that can float childlike lines then cut through dense orchestral textures with focused brilliance. More importantly, she charts Alice's journey not as a series of quirky episodes, but as a coherent arc: from curiosity to confusion, from defiance to moments of genuine terror, and finally to a fragile kind of self-acceptance. Guðmundsdóttir's stage presence balances the character's youth with a palpable intelligence; we never feel we are watching a passive observer being buffeted by events.

Her "I am who?" feels less like a cute catchphrase and more like a real, painful question. Around her swirls a virtuoso ensemble of singing actors, many of them taking on several roles. Countertenor Andrew Watts, a long-time champion of Chin's music, lends the White Rabbit, March Hare and Badger a chameleonic vocal profile and sharply drawn physicality—half nervous tic, half sly guide. His Rabbit, in particular, is both comic and faintly alarming, embodying the relentless pressure of time that haunts Alice's journey. Tenor Marcel Beekman moves with dazzling ease between Mouse, Pat, Dormouse, Cook and the Invisible Man, trading on his flair for character work and text.

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Each figure is etched with just enough exaggeration to delight without tipping into mere caricature. Mezzo-soprano Helena Rasker, as Duchess and Owl, grounds her grotesque humour in vocal authority, while Mandy Fredrich's Queen of Hearts is a showpiece of controlled excess: vocally blazing, rhythmically precise and theatrically enormous, yet always riding perfectly on top of Chin's spiky writing. Juliana Zara's Cheshire Cat slinks through the texture with silvery tone and an insouciant smile that somehow remains audible even when she is offstage.

Ben McAteer's Mad Hatter, along with the roles he doubles, adds a touch of vaudevillian anarchy without losing contact with the score's demands, and Henry Neill and Levente Páll, covering an array of male figures from griffons to kings, bring vocal solidity and well-judged comic timing. What makes this production so satisfying is the way it reconciles two aims that are often treated as mutually exclusive: the desire to push operatic language forward and the wish to connect viscerally with a wide audience. Local coverage has rightly emphasised how Chin's opera, in this staging, demonstrates that contemporary music theatre can fascinate and even "enthuse" the broader public.

Stöppler's concept—Alice's adventures as a relentless encounter with herself—gives emotional coherence to Chin's surreal mosaic of scenes. Even the wildest images, from acrobatic figures suspended above the grassy set to the fierce courtroom of the Queen, feel anchored in a psychological journey. The result is a performance that can be enjoyed purely as spectacular, strange storytelling, but that also rewards reflection on identity, growing up and the instability of perception. Crucially, the evening never lapses into academic abstraction. Humour is woven throughout—sometimes broad, sometimes very dry—and there is a playful awareness of the opera's own theatricality. Yet beneath the jokes runs a persistent undertow of unease.

Wonderland here is not a safe playground, but a place where the rules are fluid and the self can fracture. That tension gives the show its charge.
By the final curtain, as the grassy world circles once more and Alice's question still hangs in the air, one has the sense of having experienced a complete and coherent artistic vision: composer, performers and production team pulling in the same direction. For Theater an der Wien, this Alice in Wonderland is not just a notable Austrian premiere; it is a landmark demonstration of how bold contemporary opera, given the right care and imagination, can speak directly and powerfully to today's audiences.

Bericht online lesen: https://culture.en-a.eu/kunst_kultur_und_musik/falling_into_sound_and_light-92587/

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

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