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Ressort: Kunst, Kultur und Musik

Benamor - Triumph of Opereta Delight

Theater an der Wien, 02.02.2026 [ENA]

In a season already rich with musical theatre gems, the Austrian premiere of Pablo Luna's Benamor at Vienna's historic Theater an der Wien stands out as a sparkling testament to the enduring vitality of operetta and zarzuela alike. Directed by the inimitable Christof Loy and brought to life by an outstanding international cast with the ORF Radio-Symphonieorchester Wien and the Arnold Schönberg Chor.

This production transforms a rarely performed 1923 work into an utterly contemporary celebration of music, identity, and comic exuberance. Benamor — technically a zarzuela, the uniquely Spanish cousin of operetta — is a delicious blend of melody, movement, and mischief, nestled in a fairy-tale version of Persia. At its heart is a wonderfully convoluted tale of sibling identity: the Sultan Darío, eager to marry off his sister, does not know that he himself was raised as a boy, while Benamor, presumed female, is in truth a young man. Their mother, in a clever attempt to defy a brutal ancient custom, switched their identities at birth.

What makes this production truly exceptional is not merely the rarity of Luna's score on the Viennese stage — though this alone would be cause for celebration — but the way in which Loy and his collaborators have embraced the genre's spirit with unrivalled enthusiasm. From the moment the curtain rises, Benamor radiates warmth and humour, inviting the audience to delight in the sheer pleasure of operetta's ebullient rhythms and theatrical twists. The performance is unashamedly joyous, a brilliantly paced evening that marries theatrical wit with genuinely inventive musical expression.

Musically, the evening is a revelation. The ORF Radio-Symphonieorchester Wien under the baton of José Miguel Pérez-Sierra revels in Luna's richly melodic score, alternating lighthearted dance-like passages with soulful lyricism. The orchestra's crisp rhythms and sweeping flourishes remind listeners of the broader European operetta tradition of the early 20th century, while maintaining the distinctive Iberian flavour that makes Benamor so refreshing. This performance affirms once again the exceptional musical versatility of Vienna's orchestral forces and their ability to illuminate lesser-known repertoire with brilliant clarity.

The vocal performances are equally compelling. Marina Monzó as Benamor delivers a portrayal that is both vocally secure and dramatically engaging, seamlessly negotiating the vocal demands of tango-like phrases, lyrical duets, and spirited ensembles. Federico Fiorio as Darío brings a delightful blend of comedic timing and vocal poise, his presence on stage anchoring many of the work's most memorable moments. The

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ensemble, including Sofía Esparza, David Alegret, and David Oller, contributes richly coloured character work, each adding to the production's festive mood and narrative clarity. Their performances collectively embody the operetta ethos: nuanced vocal artistry married with theatrical bravado.

Beyond the music and voices, Loy's direction is a masterclass in operetta staging. He balances the humour and romance inherent in the libretto with impeccable pacing, ensuring that the audience is constantly engaged — laughing at the clever dialogue and musical turns, yet equally absorbed in the characters' emotional journeys. The staging creates a vivid visual world that echoes the work's blend of Persian exoticism with European theatrical tradition, embracing flamboyant colour and stylized movement without ever overshadowing the music.

One of the most striking aspects of this production is its cultural resonance. Though rooted in the early 20th-century zarzuela tradition, Benamor feels startlingly contemporary in its playful interrogation of gender roles and identity. The narrative's twists — two protagonists who are not who they appear to be — invite audiences to reflect on themes that resonate deeply with today's social dialogues, all while maintaining the buoyant surface of comic operetta. This juxtaposition of light-hearted entertainment and thematic depth is a testament to the genre's continued relevance, thriving on its ability to make us smile and think in equal measure.

Moreover, bringing this work to Vienna — a city synonymous with operetta's golden age — enriches the dialogue between Central European and Iberian musical theatre traditions. Historically, Vienna's stages premiered countless works by Strauss and his contemporaries; with Benamor, the Theater an der Wien expands that lineage, reintroducing audiences to a repertoire that is at once foreign and familiarly delightful. In an era when cultural institutions are seeking to broaden their horizons while honouring tradition, this production stands as an exemplar of how operetta can bridge history, geography, and artistic innovation.

In sum, Benamor at Theater an der Wien is an unqualified success — a radiant celebration of melody, narrative wit, and theatrical charm. It is rare to encounter a production that is both so thoroughly joyful and so richly expressive, yet this staging achieves precisely that. Whether you are a seasoned aficionado of operetta or a first-time visitor to the genre, this Benamor offers an unforgettable evening: vibrant, witty, and overflowing with the electrifying spirit of live musical theatre.

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

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