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Behind the Mask of Seriousness

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Florian Leopold Gassmann's L'Opera Seria, now returning to Vienna's MusikTheater an der Wien, is one of the eighteenth century's most sophisticated theatrical in-jokes – and, in this new production, it emerges as a dazzlingly contemporary meditation on artistic vanity, institutional chaos, and the fragile magic of opera itself. It was premiered in 1769 in the old Burgtheater.

The work was conceived as a "commedia per musica" that mercilessly skewers the conventions of opera seria, from overblown virtuosic arias to capricious star singers and omnipotent impresarios; yet it does so with such affection and stylistic elegance that the parody becomes a tribute. At the heart of the piece is not the fictional dramma per musica Oranzebe, but the desperate attempt to stage it. The composer Sospiro and the poet Delirio are preparing to unveil their noble creation when the familiar nightmare of operatic production sets in.

The impresario Fallito demands cuts for financial reasons, the prima donna Stonatrilla clamours for more prominence, another singer insists on a brand-new aria, and the two castrati – so crucial to the musical fabric – fail to materialise at all. To intensify the bedlam, the mothers of the singers meddle incessantly, mirroring the real-life pressures exerted by patrons, agents and families on eighteenth-century theatre life.

Gassmann and his librettist Ranieri de' Calzabigi build their satire with meticulous insider knowledge. They expose the absurdities of the old "serious" opera – its hollow pathos, its taste for endless da capo arias, its obsession with vocal display and lavish spectacle – by showing how these elements disintegrate when confronted with the egos and insecurities of those who must embody them. The fictive opera Oranzebe, with its Mughal generals, captive queens and jealousy-ridden princesses, is deliberately stuffed with the clichés of high Baroque heroics; but we encounter it almost entirely through rehearsal fragments, costume quarrels and casting disputes. When the performance finally happens, it collapses into "vergnügliches Chaos".

Musically, L'opera seria stands at a fascinating crossroads. Gassmann writes with the fluency of a composer steeped in the Italian tradition, but he constantly undercuts expectations: arias are interrupted, characters comment ironically on their own music, and ensembles erupt where rigid seria convention would prescribe orderly succession. The score requires singers who can move seamlessly between virtuosic display and razor-sharp comic timing, and this production assembles a cast of specialist singing actors to

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meet that challenge. Their ability to caricature the excesses of eighteenth-century vocalism while delivering it at a world-class level is crucial to the evening's success.

The MusikTheater an der Wien's staging adds yet another meta-layer to the work's self-reflexive humour. Director Laurent Pelly, renowned for combining biting satire with visual wit, brings L'opera seria back to the city of its birth in a production that revels in theatricality. Pelly's hallmark is his capacity to create images that are simultaneously delightful and critical: oversized costumes that turn divas into walking egos, rehearsal rooms that morph into battlefields of aesthetic principle, and props that underscore the ridiculous gulf between lofty artistic rhetoric and backstage reality. In his hands, the opera becomes a baroque "musical about making a musical", a playful cousin to modern backstage comedies.

On the musical side, Christophe Rousset and his ensemble Les Talens Lyriques provide the ideal backbone for such an enterprise. As a leading specialist in eighteenth-century repertoire, Rousset brings rhythmic buoyancy, textural clarity and a keen sense of dramatic pacing to Gassmann's score, allowing its quicksilver shifts between parody and genuine pathos to register fully. The period-informed playing of Les Talens Lyriques gives the music pungent colours and a propulsive energy that keep the evening airborne even when the onstage company appears to be falling apart.

What makes this L'opera seria particularly resonant today is its perspective on power, precarious labour, and the politics of culture. The impresario Fallito, obsessed with finances and cuts, could be a stand-in for any contemporary arts administrator balancing budgets against artistic ambition. The singers' competing demands for visibility, arias and costumes reflect a media landscape in which attention is currency and algorithms reward exaggeration. The meddling mothers evoke the many stakeholders – political, economic, ideological – who seek to shape cultural production to their own ends.

Without ever abandoning its comic tone, the opera raises serious questions about who controls the means of representation and who pays the price when an "opera seria" fails. Yet the final message is surprisingly optimistic. After the performance of Oranzebe disintegrates and Fallito absconds with the takings, the artists decide to band together, founding their own company and vowing eternal enmity against impresarios as a class. This anarchic, utopian gesture can be read as Calzabigi's and Gassmann's invitation to imagine an opera world governed not by vanity and exploitation, but by collective responsibility and mutual respect.

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