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Aribert Reimann?s Inferno Unleashed

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Aribert Reimann’s Medea (premiered 2010, revived at Theater Wien through May 2026) stands as one of contemporary opera’s most harrowing masterpieces—a sonic and psychological excavation of Euripides’s sorceress that surpasses even Cherubini’s 1797 classic in raw visceral power. This Theater Wien staging, directed by the incisive Keith Warner with the incomparable Marlis Petersen in the title role.

This transforms the Kammeroper auditorium into Corinth’s blood-soaked altar. Reimann’s score—commissioned for Petersen by Berlin Staatsoper—weds post-Schoenberg expressionism to ancient Greek modality, forging a 90-minute dramatic monolith where every scream, incantation, and betrayal carves flesh from bone. From the opening’s sepulchral brass fanfares—evoking Jason’s triumphant return—Reimann establishes a soundworld of inexorable doom. Petersen’s Medea erupts as primal force incarnate: her dramatisch farbiger Sopran navigates Reimann’s stratospheric tessitura with diamond-cut precision, tessitura spanning e" to b-flat'" in jagged Sprechstimme.

The “Kleiderarie” (her poisoned robe monologue) shatters the soul: coloratura shrieks dissolve into chest-voice growls, orchestra’s col legno strings mimicking ripping fabric. Petersen—creator of the role—internalizes Medea’s arc from spurned queen to infanticidal fury with unflinching authenticity, her face a mask of Euripidean hubris and feminine rage. Jason (Norman Reinhardt) embodies patriarchal hubris: his honeyed tenor curdles into cowardice during their confrontation duet, Reimann’s stabbing woodwind punctuations underscoring textual betrayal. Kreusa (Anna-Sophie Bauer) receives Reimann’s most lush writing—bell-like harp glissandi and celesta shimmer for her bridal gown aria—making her fiery death all the more grotesque.

The Nurse (Okka von Zamla) functions as Greek chorus, her smoky mezzosoprano intoning monodos over percussion evoking Medea’s boiling cauldron. Reuschel’s Kreon blusters with Wagnerian bass fury, his futile banishment decree climaxing in orchestral Katastrophe. Tobias Kassel’s conducting reveals Reimann’s architectonic genius: Spätstil economy where every interval serves drama. The 18-player orchestra—augmented by Wagner tuba and cimbalom—functions as Medea’s internal psyche: muted brass for creeping madness, cimbalom for Colchian sorcery, harp for memory’s poisoned sweetness.

Kassel calibrates extremes masterfully: the children’s murder scene reduces to solo viola Seufzer (sighs), then explodes into full tuttis as Medea’s dragon chariot (video projection) ascends. Reimann honors Greek

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tragedy's unity of time: 90 continuous minutes without intermission, pulse racing toward apocalypse. Keith Warner's staging—imported from Hamburg—amplifies the score's ferocity without gimmickry. Boris Kudlicka's set centers a monolithic black altar that rotates to reveal Medea's alchemical laboratory: retorts bubbling with glowing viscera, projected Babylonian script incantations crawling across walls.

Warner's blocking weaponizes space: Medea corners Jason against upstage flames during their divorce duet, her physical dominance mirroring vocal supremacy. The children's murder unfolds behind semi-transparent screens—shadow puppets stabbing with surgical detachment—preserving Euripides's offstage horror while Reimann's score makes every thrust audible. Costumes blend mythic timelessness with contemporary edge: Medea's scarlet Colchian robes bleed into bloodstained modern sheath as sanity erodes; Jason's golden fleece suit devolves into rags. Lighting (Johannes Schütz) transmutes from Olympian glare to Stygian gloom, Medea's face spotlit like Rembrandt's Danaë during her final monologue.

Chorus—positioned as Corinthian mob in orchestra pit risers—functions as ekkyklema, their wordless tragos underscoring moral collapse. What elevates this Medea beyond exemplary revival status is Reimann's libretto fidelity to Euripides: no psychological softening, no redemptive coda. Medea triumphs—unrepentant, infanticidal, deified—chariot ascending as orchestra resolves to hollow fifths. Petersen's final "Nun bin ich Göttin!"—spoken on a single high B—shatters glass ceilings and operatic convention alike. Theater Wien's revival confirms Reimann's masterpiece as 21st-century repertoire cornerstone, Petersen its undying priestess. In an era craving female rage anthems, this Medea doesn't whisper—it immolates.

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