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Magnificent Encounter with Human Truth and Music

Salzburger Festspiele, 26.05.2026 [ENA]

Monteverdi's Il ritorno d'Ulisse in patria at the Salzburg Festival promises to be an exceptional event, one that brings together dramatic intelligence, emotional depth, and the unmistakable magic of early opera in a form that feels startlingly alive. This is a work that never depends on spectacle alone, yet it creates a world of extraordinary richness through the simplest means: voice, recitative, instrumental color

The performance is the endlessly subtle interplay of human feeling. Salzburg's new production appears ideally conceived to reveal why this opera remains one of the most moving and theatrically inventive achievements of the seventeenth century. What gives Ulisse its enduring power is the way it binds myth to intimacy. The story of Odysseus' return home is, on one level, an epic tale of disguise, perseverance, and divine intervention. Yet Monteverdi and his librettist Giacomo Badoaro turn that epic into a profoundly human drama, shaped by doubt, fidelity, recognition, and emotional hesitation.

Salzburg's framing of the work highlights exactly this dual nature: the grandeur of the myth and the fragile, poignant reality of the people who inhabit it. The opera's great triumph lies in its characterisation. Penelope is one of the most remarkable figures in all opera, not because she simply waits, but because she embodies resistance, memory, and wounded intelligence. Her emotional journey gives the opera its deepest pulse. Odysseus, too, is far more than a hero returning victorious; he arrives altered by experience, cautious, and in need of recognition as much as triumph. That balance between strength and vulnerability is what makes the work feel so modern, and why it can still speak so directly to contemporary audiences.

The Salzburg production's use of the Milanese puppet company Compagnia Marionettistica Carlo Colla & Figli is a particularly inspired choice. Far from being a novelty, this collaboration can deepen the opera's sense of mythic distance and symbolic resonance. Puppetry allows the world of the gods, servants, suitors, and disguised heroes to acquire a heightened poetic dimension, while also offering a visual language of delicacy and stylisation. If handled with imagination, it can sharpen rather than soften the emotional truth of the work.

The musical leadership of Gianluca Capuano is another reason for great anticipation. Monteverdi requires a conductor who understands how to keep the drama moving while allowing the language to breathe naturally. The score's genius lies in its ability to make speech itself sing, and Capuano is especially well placed to reveal the fluidity, tension, and expressive immediacy of that style. Under a musician of this

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sensitivity, Monteverdi's recitative becomes not merely a vehicle for text, but the living heartbeat of the drama.

One of the most striking things about Ulisse is how beautifully it balances the sacred, the comic, and the intimate. The gods speak with authority, but the servants and suitors bring earthier textures and sharper contrasts. Grotesque appetite, vanity, and opportunism sit beside loyalty, grief, and wonder. This variety gives the opera tremendous theatrical richness. It is a work that contains many worlds at once, and Salzburg's production seems to recognize that the opera's greatness lies precisely in that multiplicity.

The Festival's presentation also underscores the importance of Monteverdi's musical characterisation. Each figure is given a distinct emotional contour, and the score seems constantly to illuminate psychological truth rather than merely advance plot. That is why the opera still feels fresh: it is not a museum piece, but a living inquiry into identity, time, and recognition. The return home is not simply a narrative endpoint; it is a process of emotional reckoning.

The setting at the Haus für Mozart further enhances expectations. Such a venue is ideal for an opera whose power resides in nuance, clarity, and the close correspondence between voice and expression. Monteverdi does not require grandiloquence; he requires attention, imagination, and the kind of acoustic intimacy that allows every inflection to register. Salzburg is one of the few places where such a work can be presented with both theatrical scale and chamber-like focus.

What makes this production especially promising is its understanding that Il ritorno d'Ulisse in patria is not merely a story about a hero coming home. It is a meditation on endurance, on the cost of fidelity, and on the fragile miracle of recognition after long separation. In that sense, the opera offers one of the most satisfying resolutions in the repertory, not because everything is simple, but because human constancy finally finds its reward. Salzburg's approach seems poised to bring out the grace of that ending with exceptional dignity.

In the end, this promises to be a deeply rewarding Monteverdi evening: musically refined, theatrically imaginative, and emotionally resonant. Il ritorno d'Ulisse in patria remains one of opera's great treasures because it understands that homecoming is never only geographical. It is also spiritual, emotional, and moral. Salzburg's production appears ready to honour that truth with intelligence, style, and profound musical care.

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