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Lady Magnesia / Zweimal Alexander

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The double bill Lady Magnesia / Zweimal Alexander at the Theater an der Wien offered an evening of witty unease, stylistic contrast, and theatrical intelligence. Drawing together Mieczyslaw Weinberg's Lady Magnesia and Bohuslav Martinu's Zweimal Alexander, the production explored jealousy, disguise, and social absurdity with a pleasingly off-kilter sense of humor. Both works thrive on irony and instability.

In combination they created an evening that felt compact in scale but rich in texture, with each opera reflecting the other like two distorted mirrors. What made the program especially effective was its refusal to smooth out the oddities of either score. The Theater an der Wien framed the evening as a meeting of two little worlds in which emotional chaos is sharpened by musical elegance, and that description proved apt. Weinberg's Lady Magnesia leans into grotesque comedy, while Martinu's Zweimal Alexander brings a lighter, more fluid theatrical wit; together they formed a dramaturgical pairing that was both clever and disconcerting.

From an artistic point of view, the evening's real strength lay in its sense of balance. The pieces are different in musical language and dramatic tone, yet both depend on timing, character detail, and a capacity for sudden shifts between seriousness and absurdity. That shared DNA allowed the production to move briskly without feeling superficial. Instead of treating the operas as curiosities, it presented them as sharply observed studies of vanity and emotional confusion, and that gave the evening a coherence beyond its format.

The atmosphere of the staging also mattered. The Theater an der Wien has described the pairing as suitable for lovers of "black humor," and that framing captures the production's appeal well. There was something deliciously unstable about the evening's mood: never entirely tragic, never simply comic, but suspended in that fertile zone where embarrassment, desire, and social performance overlap. That quality is rare, and it gave the performance its distinct flavor.

Musically, the event benefited from the fact that both works invite a detailed, chamber-like responsiveness from performers. In a setting like the Kammeroper, the smaller scale can become an asset, because it sharpens the audience's attention to irony, vocal characterization, and ensemble interplay. The result was an evening that felt intellectually composed rather than merely entertaining. Even where the material leaned toward the eccentric, the production preserved clarity and theatrical purpose.

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As a whole, Lady Magnesia / Zweimal Alexander stood out as a thoughtfully curated opera evening: compact, unusual, and artistically self-assured. It offered not the comfort of familiar repertory, but the pleasure of discovery — the sense of seeing two rarely paired works reveal unexpected affinities and contrasts. That kind of programming depends on confidence, and the Theater an der Wien delivered exactly that, with a production that trusted its audience to enjoy ambiguity, irony, and musical invention.

In the end, the evening's charm came from its refusal to over-explain itself. It invited the audience into a world of sly gestures, unstable emotions, and carefully calibrated oddness, and it did so with style. The result was a rewarding theatrical experience that felt both compact and memorable, and one that confirmed how much life there still is in lesser-known opera when it is presented with imagination.

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