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KaiserRequiem

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“KaiserRequiem” at the Volksoper Wien is a work of rare conceptual coherence and emotional force: a music theatrical ritual that confronts twentieth century catastrophe without either aestheticising or simplifying it. Conceived by Omer Meir Wellber and choreographed and staged by Andreas Heise, the evening fuses Viktor Ullmann’s chamber opera Der Kaiser von Atlantis oder Die Tod Verweigerung.

It fuses with Mozart’s Requiem into a single arc that feels less like a collage than like a dialogue between two testaments written in the shadow of death. The dramaturgical idea is disarmingly clear. Ullmann’s bitter allegory, composed in Theresienstadt in 1943/44, imagines an autocrat whose lust for war becomes so grotesque that Death himself refuses to cooperate; Mozart’s unfinished Requiem, by contrast, has long been heard as a personal and liturgical meditation on mortality. In “KaiserRequiem,” these works are interwoven, scene by scene and movement by movement, so that the satire of power in Atlantiscontinually collides with the liturgical solemnity of the Requiem.

This could easily have felt like a mere patchwork. Yet the musical transitions, devised by Wellber, are remarkably organic: Ullmann’s jagged instrumental colours bleed into Mozart’s more familiar harmonies, while the Requiem’s choral masses comment on, frame or contradict the action of the opera. The result is a kind of oratorio ballet in which no single genre dominates—neither opera, nor concert, nor dance, but a hybrid form that fits the commemorative occasion: the 80th anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz and the International Day of Commemoration in Memory of the Victims of the Holocaust.

Heise’s staging takes the notion of “dialogue” seriously. The dancers of the Wiener Staatsballett and the singers of the Volksoper are placed on an equal footing, sometimes mirroring, sometimes shadowing one another. Characters from Ullmann’s opera—above all Death, Harlequin and the Emperor—acquire choreographic doubles, so that their inner states appear simultaneously in voice and body. This layering of presence underlines Ullmann’s fundamental intuition: that under totalitarianism, even emotions are choreographed, yet traces of freedom persist in gesture, play and refusal.

Sascha Thomsen’s stage and costume design supports this approach with an imagery that is suggestive rather than illustrative. There are no naturalistic barracks or camp fences; instead we see a landscape of scaffolds, platforms and suspended objects, a liminal space between world and underworld where uniforms and ritual garments circulate like interchangeable costumes. The effect is to universalise the specific

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historical reference without blurring it: the audience is never allowed to forget that Ullmann wrote his score in Theresienstadt, but the visual code invites us to read “KaiserRequiem” as a reflection on power and mortality wherever they appear.

Musically, the evening is anchored by the Volksoper orchestra under Wellber’s direction, negotiating the leap from Ullmann’s acidic modernism to Mozart’s late Classical idiom with impressive flexibility. Ullmann’s score, with its sly quotations of chorales and popular idioms, emerges as “gute Musik des 20. Jahrhunderts,” rhythmically sharp and structurally tight, given here with a bite that never tips into exaggeration.

The Requiem movements, by contrast, are shaped with broad, arching phrases and a sense of suspended time. Particularly the “Lacrimosa,” placed as a kind of coda to the evening, achieves an almost unbearable simplicity after the grotesque parades of the Emperor’s world: as one reviewer noted, the work could hardly end more beautifully or more devastatingly. The Volksoper chorus, prepared with evident care, sings with a blend of clarity and weight that honours both the liturgical function of the music and the theatrical situation into which it has been placed.

Among the soloists, the Emperor is drawn not as a ranting caricature but as a dangerously recognisable ruler, seduced by his own rhetoric until death’s strike renders his power meaningless. Death himself, whether sung or danced, is less a monstrous figure than a weary professional, exhausted by the industrial scale of slaughter demanded of him—a conception that resonates chillingly with the mechanised mass murder of the Shoah. Harlequin, the other key role, brings an element of fragile humanity and absurd humour, his melancholy jester’s play highlighting the capacity of art to resist even when it cannot prevent catastrophe.

If there is a point of contention among critics, it lies in the balance between dance and music. Some have felt that Heise’s choreography, though often eloquent, remains more atmospheric than narratively precise, and that the dancers function at times as “Beiwerk”—beautiful accompaniment rather than fully developed protagonists. Yet even when the dramaturgical line blurs, individual images stay with the viewer: bodies falling in slow motion as the Emperor proclaims total war; a community huddled under a shroud like fabric; the tentative re emergence of movement during the Requiem’s more consoling passages.

One could argue that this very imprecision is part of the piece’s honesty. Faced with the historical abyss of Auschwitz, any attempt at clear “reconstruction” risks aestheticising horror. “KaiserRequiem” chooses, instead, for a language of fragments and impressions, trusting the audience to make connections rather than dictating them. Ultimately, what makes “KaiserRequiem” so compelling is its refusal to offer easy catharsis. The fusion of Ullmann and Mozart does not resolve into a reassuring narrative of suffering and

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redemption; instead, it leaves us with a series of questions about the relationship between art, power and memory.

The evening is “todtraurig dem Tod gewidmet,” as one critic aptly put it, yet it is not paralysed by mourning: the very act of performance—of voices and bodies on a stage in Vienna in 2025—asserts continuity against the annihilating logic that killed Ullmann and Kien in Auschwitz. For the Volksoper, “KaiserRequiem” represents a courageous stretching of its own identity, bringing opera, ballet and concert into a shared space of reflection on the darkest chapters of European history. For audiences, it offers not entertainment but an encounter—sometimes uncomfortable, often profoundly moving—with the enduring power of music and theatre to speak of death, and thus, obliquely, of the value of life.

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