



Ressort: Kunst, Kultur und Musik

## Kirill Serebrennikov Drama of Power, Desire and the Body

Vienna State Opera, 14.09.2026 [ENA]

Giuseppe Verdi's *Don Carlo* is an opera of enormous emotional and political density. Beneath its historical setting—the court of Philip II of Spain, the repression of Flanders, and the collision between monarchy and Church—lies a drama of intimate devastation. Fathers and sons, friends and lovers, rulers and subjects all find themselves trapped within structures that make freedom almost impossible.

In Kirill Serebrennikov's new production for the Vienna State Opera, the familiar world of rigid Spanish ceremony is radically reimagined. Inspired by a visit to Kyoto Costume Institute, Serebrennikov relocates the opera into a contemporary visual universe where fashion, physicality, ritual, and surveillance expose the violence beneath systems of political authority. The result is a *Don Carlo* that refuses historical illustration. Serebrennikov does not decorate Verdi's tragedy with sumptuous sixteenth-century scenery, black velvet, religious pageantry, and Habsburg grandeur.

Instead, he presents power as something performed through bodies, uniforms, choreography, and the control of space. His work has always been alert to the political meaning of theatrical images, and in *Don Carlo* that alertness becomes the production's central strength. The court is not simply a setting; it is an apparatus. Individuals are dressed, positioned, watched, handled, and disciplined by the visual and social order around them.

The decision to draw inspiration from fashion is particularly apt. Costume in Serebrennikov's production becomes more than a marker of period or rank. It defines how characters occupy their bodies and how they are permitted to appear before others. The opera's great theme is the conflict between private feeling and public role, and the production makes that conflict visible from the outset. *Don Carlo*'s emotional instability, Elisabetta's isolation, Eboli's sexual and political frustration, Rodrigo's idealism, and Philip's exhausted authority are all framed by a world in which individual identity is continuously constrained by an imposed image.

This visual approach finds its most unsettling expression in the auto-da-fé scene. Traditionally, this is the opera's grandest public tableau: a ceremonial spectacle of royal magnificence and religious terror. Serebrennikov strips away any possibility of comfortable historical distance. The scene becomes an image of collective submission and institutional cruelty, in which the theatre of punishment is inseparable from the theatre of power. The crowd does not merely observe violence; it participates in the mechanism that makes

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violence legitimate. Verdi's magnificent choral writing, with its ceremonial force and dark undertow, acquires a frightening contemporary relevance.

Serebrennikov's direction is also perceptive in its handling of the opera's more private scenes. Don Carlo can easily become emotionally static, particularly when its long confrontations are treated as a succession of formal vocal set pieces. Here, physical distance and spatial composition sharpen the relationships. Carlo and Elisabetta's love is not sentimentalised; it is represented as an impossible desire shaped by political exchange and emotional renunciation. Their final encounter carries real force because the production has made clear how little space the surrounding world allows them to inhabit as human beings.

The relationship between Carlo and Rodrigo is perhaps the opera's most essential emotional axis, and Serebrennikov rightly gives it a particular intensity. Their friendship is not merely a noble declaration of shared political principle. It becomes a fragile attempt to create trust within a world structured by suspicion. Rodrigo's death is therefore not simply an act of sacrifice; it is the destruction of the only relationship in which Carlo can briefly imagine another political and personal future.

The musical performance provides the necessary emotional scale for this reading. Vittorio Grigolo, making his Vienna State Opera role debut as Don Carlo, brings an impetuous, open-hearted tenor to the title role. His sound is intensely present and dramatically immediate, well suited to a character whose private anguish repeatedly threatens to overwhelm the discipline expected of a prince. Elena Stikhina offers an Elisabetta of vocal luminosity and inner steel. Her interpretation suggests not a passive victim of dynastic politics, but a woman whose dignity becomes a form of resistance.

As Philip II, Günther Groissböck brings gravity, authority, and a sense of human fatigue to the king's solitude. His great scene, "Ella giammai m'amò," becomes the opera's moral centre: a moment in which political absolutism is revealed as a condition of profound loneliness. Étienne Dupuis gives Rodrigo, Marquis of Posa, elegance and conviction, while Eve-Maud Hubeaux brings vocal amplitude and dramatic volatility to Eboli, illuminating the character's complex mixture of pride, jealousy, desire, and humiliation. Ain Anger completes the opera's devastating central confrontation as the Grand Inquisitor, whose authority is chilling precisely because it needs no theatrical excess.

Conducted by Pier Giorgio Morandi, the performance unfolds in Verdi's four-act Milan version of 1884. Morandi understands the work's architecture: its balance of French grand-opera inheritance, Italian melodic intensity, and increasingly concentrated dramatic realism. The score's public scenes retain their breadth, while the private confrontations are allowed to breathe and accumulate tension.

Serebrennikov's Don Carlo succeeds because it recognises that Verdi's opera is not fundamentally about

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the past. It is about the modernity of repression: the ways institutions regulate desire, punish dissent, create public images, and transform private lives into political property. By making the body, costume, and visual ritual central to the drama, this production gives Don Carlo a renewed urgency. It is an interpretation of striking theatrical intelligence—bold, sometimes disquieting, but consistently alive to the tragic truth of Verdi's masterpiece.

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