



Ressort: Kunst, Kultur und Musik

Theatre of Love, Jealousy and Art: Adriana Lecouvreur

Vienna State Opera, 17.09.2026 [ENA]

Francesco Cilea's *Adriana Lecouvreur* occupies a singular place in the Italian operatic repertoire. It belongs to the era of verismo, yet it does not pursue verismo's most obvious territory of raw social realism, violent passion, or rural tragedy. Instead, it turns toward the eighteenth-century theatre, the world of the Comédie-Française, salons, aristocratic rivalries, and the dangerous intimacy.

This intimacy is between performance and life. At the Vienna State Opera, David McVicar's opulent and dramatically alert production reveals precisely why this opera continues to fascinate: it is both a love story and a tragedy of artistic identity, in which an actress becomes increasingly unable to separate the language of the stage from the emotional risks of the world beyond it.

McVicar's staging, with sets by Charles Edwards, costumes by Brigitte Reiffenstuel, lighting by Adam Silverman, and choreography by Andrew George, embraces the opera's historical world without treating it as decorative wallpaper. The production is richly visual, carefully researched, and faithful to the period atmosphere of early eighteenth-century France, but its greatest virtue lies in the clarity with which it defines the social spaces of the drama. The theatre is a place of collective invention; the salon a place of coded rivalry; the private room a place where public roles fall away, only to reveal more painful forms of concealment.

This is not an opera that benefits from radical updating. Cilea's score is saturated with the atmosphere of a particular theatrical culture, and McVicar understands that the eighteenth-century setting is integral to the work's dramatic mechanism. *Adriana* is a celebrated actress, a woman who commands the stage but remains vulnerable in a society where aristocratic privilege can transform admiration into possession. Her rival, the Principessa di Bouillon, has social power but not *Adriana*'s gift for emotional expression. Maurizio, Count of Saxony, moves uneasily between military reputation, aristocratic obligation, and romantic desire.

Maurizio, Count of Saxony, moves uneasily between military reputation, aristocratic obligation, and romantic desire. Michonnet, the theatre's loyal stage manager, sees *Adriana*'s humanity more clearly than anyone, yet is fated to love her without hope.

The production's opening in the bustle of the theatre is particularly effective. McVicar makes the

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Comédie-Française feel like a working artistic organism rather than a static historical reconstruction. Actors, stagehands, admirers, and theatrical routines establish a world in which illusion is produced through labour, discipline, and collective artistry. It is an essential starting point, because Adriana's greatness is inseparable from her craft.

She is not simply a woman who happens to perform; she is an artist whose sensitivity, rhetorical intelligence, and capacity for emotional truth have been shaped by the stage.

In the title role, Ermonela Jaho brings the ideal combination of vocal vulnerability and dramatic immediacy. Her Adriana is never merely fragile. Jaho understands that the character's emotional openness is also her artistic strength. The soprano's unmistakably personal sound—slender, bright, capable of sudden shadows and melting pianissimi—gives the heroine a sense of exposure that is intensely affecting. In her great moments of theatrical recitation, Jaho allows words and musical line to become inseparable.

Her delivery of the Phèdre monologue is not a display piece inserted into the action; it is the moment in which Adriana uses the authority of art to express a truth she cannot state directly in society. This ability to make vocal detail feel dramatically inevitable is especially valuable in Cilea. The composer's music asks for sustained legato, sensitivity to phrase endings, and an awareness that the most significant emotional shifts often occur in a change of colour or in the release of a line rather than in overt vocal force. Jaho's singing seems to arise from speech, but it never loses its lyric contour. In the opera's final act, as the poisoned violets take effect, she avoids easy sentimentality.

The scene becomes moving because the performance has already established Adriana's relationship to the stage: death is not only the extinction of a lover, but of a voice and an artistic consciousness. Elina Garanca, as the Principessa di Bouillon, provides a magnificent counterweight. Her mezzo-soprano has the amplitude, sheen, and aristocratic command necessary for a figure who enters the drama with formidable social authority. But Garanca does not reduce the Princess to a conventional villainess. Her jealousy is dangerous, certainly, but it is also rooted in humiliation and frustration. She is a woman accustomed to power who discovers that status cannot command love.

The richness of Garanca's vocal presence makes this contradiction audible: beneath the controlled grandeur lies an emotional volatility that turns rivalry into catastrophe. Contemporary reports from the Vienna run have rightly singled out the exceptional quality of the central female pairing. Luciano Ganci gives Maurizio an ardent, generous tenor sound, bringing both heroic line and a welcome sense of emotional uncertainty to the Count of Saxony. Maurizio can appear frustratingly passive if sung as an uncomplicated romantic lead. Ganci instead suggests a man accustomed to authority but hesitant in the presence of genuine feeling.

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His exchanges with Adriana gain in warmth because he responds to her not only as a lover but as an artist whose intensity both attracts and unsettles him. As Michonnet, Roberto Frontali provides the opera's quiet moral centre. His baritone has the verbal sensitivity and human warmth the role requires, and his portrayal avoids the trap of presenting Michonnet as merely a kindly older admirer. He understands the theatre, understands Adriana, and recognises that his love cannot compete with the glamour of Maurizio's world. His final scenes possess a particularly affecting dignity: he remains, even in grief, the character most capable of care without possession.

From the pit, Marco Armiliato leads with a sure sense of Cilea's particular orchestral language. The Vienna State Opera Orchestra responds with warmth, transparency, and a natural feeling for the score's ebb and flow. Armiliato does not mistake delicacy for inertia. He gives the music the space it needs to breathe, sustaining the long melodic arcs while maintaining a supple dramatic pulse. The orchestration—so often understated in Cilea's finest pages—emerges as a web of refined colour rather than a merely supportive accompaniment.

This Adriana Lecouvreur succeeds because all its elements recognise the opera's central paradox. It is a drama about acting, but its greatest moments demand absolute emotional truth. McVicar's sumptuous production gives the work a credible historical world; Jaho and Garanca make its feminine rivalry dramatically and vocally electric; Ganci and Frontali bring contrasting forms of male devotion; and Armiliato restores the sensuous, fragile radiance of Cilea's score. At the Vienna State Opera, Adriana Lecouvreur emerges not as a period curiosity, but as a profoundly theatrical meditation on love, art, and the devastating cost of being seen.

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Redaktion und Verantwortlichkeit:

V.i.S.d.P. und gem. § 6 MDStV: Dr. Nadejda Komendantova

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