



Ressort: Kunst, Kultur und Musik

Hercules Handel Heroic World, Illuminated from Within

Theater an der Wien, 22.10.2026 [ENA]

Handel's Hercules promises an evening of exceptional dramatic substance at Theater an der Wien. Presented in concert by the Opera Fuoco Orchestra and the Chœur de Chambre de Namur, this musical drama turns away from the spectacle of heroic conquest to examine the fragile emotional world awaiting the conqueror at home. Its subject is not the celebration of strength, but the devastating inadequacy of strength.

It is confronted with jealousy, mistrust and the desperate need for reassurance. First performed in 1745, Hercules occupies a fascinating position between oratorio and opera. Handel's designation, "musical drama," captures its particular character: the narrative possesses theatrical urgency, while the chorus offers a reflective perspective resembling that of Greek tragedy. With an English libretto by Thomas Broughton, the work brings the myth of Hercules's death into an intensely human sphere. Legendary figures become recognisable individuals whose emotional misunderstandings carry irreversible consequences.

The dramatic premise is immediately compelling. Hercules returns after a prolonged absence at war, bringing with him Iole, the daughter of his defeated enemy. What might appear, from the victor's perspective, to be another consequence of conquest becomes an intolerable disturbance within his marriage. Dejanira regards the foreign princess with suspicion; Hercules's insistence that he loves only his wife fails to restore her confidence. The tragedy develops through the widening distance between what one person declares and what another can believe.

Dejanira consequently stands at the emotional centre of the work. Her jealousy is more than a convenient mechanism for advancing the plot: it exposes the vulnerability beneath her position as wife and queen. Handel's characterisation invites attention to the way fear can harden into certainty, and certainty into destructive action. The fascination of this figure lies in that transformation. Her suffering demands understanding, even as the consequences of her mistrust resist excuse.

Hercules, meanwhile, acquires a dimension more interesting than uncomplicated grandeur. The returning war hero inhabits a world in which victory should confirm his authority, yet authority proves insufficient to resolve intimate conflict. His assurances cannot command belief. This opposition between public achievement and private helplessness gives the drama its distinctive force: the man defined by extraordinary power encounters an emotional crisis that power cannot master. Handel's psychological

Redaktioneller Programmdienst: European News Agency

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perspective makes the hero's vulnerability integral to his stature rather than merely its negation.

Iole completes the central triangle without being reducible to a romantic rival. As the daughter of a vanquished enemy, brought home as the spoils of war, she embodies the human cost concealed within heroic triumph. Her presence connects the battlefield to the household, making conquest impossible to separate from its aftermath. The production's introduction identifies her among Handel's principal character studies, a reminder that this tragedy encompasses more than the jealousy of a wife or the misfortune of a celebrated husband.

The concert format is particularly attractive for a work whose dramatic identity resides so strongly in musical characterisation. Without an elaborate scenic framework, attention can concentrate on the relationships established through vocal expression, orchestral response and the progression of the text. The Opera Fuoco Orchestra's participation offers the instrumental foundation for this encounter, while the English performance, supported by German surtitles, preserves direct contact with Broughton's language. The format promises intimacy without sacrificing the work's tragic scale.

The Chœur de Chambre de Namur has an equally consequential place in that conception. Theater an der Wien highlights the choruses as among the work's outstanding features, describing their commentary as analogous to Greek tragedy. Their importance therefore extends beyond splendour of sound: they enlarge the perspective, placing individual suffering within a broader moral horizon. The alternation between private emotion and collective reflection gives Hercules an architecture in which the audience is encouraged not only to feel, but also to consider.

What makes this forthcoming evening so appealing is the convergence of mythic grandeur and psychological precision. Handel does not need to diminish his characters to reveal their humanity; instead, their legendary identities intensify the recognisable emotions beneath them. Theater an der Wien's presentation promises a concentrated encounter with that achievement: dignified, moving and dramatically searching. Beyond the hero's renown, Hercules asks how love becomes mistrust—and how disastrously human beings can mistake their fears for truth.

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Redaktion und Verantwortlichkeit:

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