

THE VIENNA REVIEW

THE BEST THINGS TO DO IN VIENNA

THEATRE MUSIC ARTS FILM FOOD & DRINK AB

A Stage on Every Corner

Vienna's "off" opera scene is refreshing, entertaining and richly varied from Kammeroper to the Last Enjoyable Opera Theatre

CYNTHIA PECK – Oct 17, 2013



The Kammeroper's Semiramide the first modern-day staging of the opera (Photo: Photo: Armin Bardel/VBW)

The abundance of opera in this town sometimes makes me giddy. If all the world's a stage, in Vienna it's a theatre in song. And I'm not only talking about the three big opera houses in town, although they are all familiar, places where I often sit – or stand – with wide-eyed enthusiasm until the last note has sounded. Or, so to speak, until the fat lady has finished singing.

But also exciting are the dozens of smaller music theatre events and "free" ensembles that pop up every season around town. You find them in venues ranging from dance halls and basements, to ancient abbeys and former factories. And while some come and go, others have established themselves as an "alternative scene" to the major houses.

There is a self-confident atmosphere in Vienna when it

comes to opera, and these small groups manifest it in spades, although many are not really what one can call "opera companies". They are often the result of a single person's energy and ideas; their members fluctuate and most have no permanent home. And they are hard to find. But if you stumble across one of Vienna's "off" operas, you almost always get some very solid entertainment. On occasion it can even be extraordinary.

The **kammeroper**, Vienna's established chamber opera, was recently taken under the wing of the Theater an der Wien as a podium and spring-board for young talent. The little stage, tucked away in an alley off the Fleischmarkt near Schwedenplatz, is in the former dance hall of the Post Hotel. The productions last season (the first under the new management) were refreshing and energetic: a good complement to the mother house.

In October this year, the theatre is presenting seven performances of *Semiramide*. The opera by Leonardo Vinci (the 18th-century composer, not the artist) was re-worked by George Frideric Handel, who composed recitatives and added some popular songs of the day. His *pasticcio* – or in modern terms, plagiarism – was a 1733 flop. Maybe that's why this staging is the first modern-day production of the work. The plot involves an Assyrian queen who, after the death of her husband, rules for forty years disguised as a man. The Kammeroper's minimalist staging is a nice foil for the story's baroque complexities of political intrigue, confused passion and insidious misunderstandings.

The **neue oper wien (now)** is celebrating its 20th anniversary this season. At the end of the month, as part of the Wien Modern festival, the group is staging the world première of *Paradise Reloaded* (Lilith) by contemporary Hungarian composer Peter Eötvös.

In Jewish folklore, Lilith was the first wife of Adam, created like him from the dust of the earth. But after refusing to become subservient to her husband, she became a female daemon. In the end, Adam has to choose between the two women: the self-sacrificing and motherly Eve, or the independent and self-confident Lilith.

The four performances, in co-production with the Wien Modern festival, will be in Halle E of the MuseumsQuartier. The huge hall, with bleacher-style seating and a deep

stage that seems to reach into infinity, is a marvellously flexible space that is well suited for big modern opera.

The **sirene operntheater** has been around for about fifteen years. The ensemble focuses on musical theatre collaborations with Austrian authors and composers. Since the group's founding, they have staged 43 world premières as well as a number of smaller experimental projects. In November, also in cooperation with Wien Modern, they are presenting four performances of GATES / Gäste!, four "operellas" – little operas – that have been created by four librettists and four composers. All four pieces examine the ambiguous relationship between hosts and their guests – hospitality and its tacit duties, unlimited rights and mysterious prohibitions. Performances are at the Palais Kabelwerk, in the 12th District.

The productions of the long-standing **serapions theater** (founded in 1973) are not really opera and not really dance and not really theatre, but a combination of all three. Probably the best description is "musical movement theatre", and so the company deserves a place in this list. Their home is the big, half-raw performance space Odeon, in the former grain stock exchange in the 2nd District. In October Odeon will be hosting dance by the Austrian Gervasi company and a concert of the Iranian Ensemble Shanbehzadeh. The Serapions Theater will be back in December.

October will also see three performances of *Slobodija Odyseia, mon Amour!* Created by **bahamut productions**, a Vienna-based international theatre group, the work highlights music played by Roma musicians. Based on Homer's *Odyssey* and described as a "theatre road movie", it is a music and dance drama about modern-day homelessness, expulsion and flight. The shows will be held in the former Anker bread factory in the 10th District.

The **kosmos theater** in the 7th District is Vienna's main forum for women performance artists. It will host six evenings in October of the baroque opera *Talestri – Regina delle amazzoni* by Maria Antonia Walpurgis (1724–1780). As is nearly always the fate of women composers, you probably have never have heard of Walpurgis, a Bavarian princess, mother of nine, and in her day a successful composer. Politically revolutionary and musically excellent,

the work had its first performance in 1763, and its second – last spring. The production has a predominantly female team: from the conductor (Elisabeth Attl) to the director, the musicians, and most of the singers on stage. Ah yes, the two male roles will be sung by men...

The **letztes erfreuliches operntheater (l.e.o.)** is a charming, off-beat "opera" company whose name translates as the "Last Enjoyable Opera Theatre". In its cabaret-like performing space, the audience sits at little tables, drinking unpretentious *Grüner Veltliner* wine and eating slices of bread spread with schmaltz. One of the great pleasures of L.E.O. is its sing-along performances. This month the audience will be invited to sing the crowd scenes of *Carmen*. For anyone who usually only raises their voice in the shower, this is the place to go.

While not exactly music theatre, Patrick Süsskind's *Der Kontrabass* is theatre about music. The play is about the life, loves and passions of a misogynist, Wagner-loving, noise-hating player of "the most important instrument in the orchestra", the double bass. This month there will be two performances (in German) of the one-man show at Brick-5, a performance space in the 15th District. Before WWII the building was home to a Jewish culture centre and a pea-shelling factory; in its revitalised form it is becoming a magnet for performances linked to social criticism and commentary.

To create some order to this plethora of small companies, several of them have grouped together in the platform **musiktheater wien**. An alphabetic directory of the platform's groups reads: ad hoc, Drama Shop, MuPATH, Musikwerkstatt Wien, netzzeit, Neues Wiener Musiktheater, Oper Unterwegs, Pandoras Box, PHACE, progetto semiserio, Teatro Barocco, Totales Theater, Wiener Taschenoper, ZOON Musiktheater. As mentioned, performances are irregular; it is worth checking the platform's website.

For centuries, if not millennia, musical theatre has been considered an epitome of artistic achievement. The musical stage – its form, artistic message, social merit – has been the topic of countless philosophical discussions. And still it remains a genre that is immensely pleasurable. Luckily, in Vienna there is a stage on nearly every corner.