



Ressort: Kunst, Kultur und Musik

Intimacy, Darkness and Revelation

Vienna State Opera, 09.10.2026 [ENA]

Some operatic pairings offer contrast; others reveal an unexpected kinship as the current one this autumn. The Vienna State Opera's presentation of Alexander Zemlinsky's *Eine florentinische Tragödie* and Béla Bartók's *Herzog Blaubarts Burg* belongs compellingly to the latter category. Bringing together two concentrated explorations of desire, violence and emotional concealment.

This double bill offers something more substantial than two successive one-act operas: a searching meditation on the unsettling experience of discovering the person one believes one knows. The production's distinction lies in Vasily Barkhatov's decision to treat the works as successive chapters in the history of a single couple. Rather than allowing the interval to separate two independent dramatic worlds, his interpretation makes it a bridge between crisis and confrontation. Zemlinsky's apparently domestic tragedy becomes the explosive precondition for Bartók's inward journey. The resulting continuity is intellectually stimulating, while retaining the disturbing ambiguity essential to both operas.

In *Eine florentinische Tragödie*, Barkhatov relocates the confrontation to the premises of an elegant interior-design business established by Simone and Bianca. Their shared enterprise once embodied happiness; now it frames a marriage exhausted by routine. Particularly provocative is the transformation of Guido Bardi into a psychotherapist conducting a role-playing exercise. By assuming the identity of Bianca's former lover, he activates jealousies that prove disastrously resistant to therapeutic control. This is an ingenious way of exposing the violence beneath cultivated manners.

What makes the interpretation persuasive is its refusal to sentimentalise reconciliation. Simone's killing of the therapist rekindles the couple's attraction, but the restoration of passion carries an appalling moral cost. Their renewed intimacy is not innocence recovered; it is complicity discovered. Barkhatov thereby preserves the essential shock of Zemlinsky's ending while giving its psychological mechanism a contemporary vocabulary. The domestic environment becomes less a refuge than a pressure chamber in which civility, possession and erotic fascination dangerously converge.

Zemlinsky's score is wonderfully suited to such emotional instability. Its luxuriant orchestral language, poised between late Romanticism and modernism, enlarges the characters' evasions into a world of barely contained feeling. The Staatsoper's introduction identifies the musical inheritance of Brahms, Mahler and Richard Strauss, yet the dramatic fascination lies in the relationship between opulence and threat. Beauty

Redaktioneller Programmdienst: European News Agency

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does not soften the cruelty of the action; it makes the attraction to that cruelty more disquieting.

The passage to Bluebeard's Castle changes the musical atmosphere without abandoning the central relationship. Where Zemlinsky surrounds the confrontation with sumptuous orchestral richness, Bartók creates a mystery in which the orchestra itself becomes the principal narrator. Impressionistic colour and the influence of Eastern European folk music help establish a language at once elemental and elusive. Judith's demands for revelation are consequently more than questions addressed to a husband: they initiate an encounter with everything intimacy cannot comfortably contain.

Barkhatov's seven doors disclose the couple's shared traumas rather than Bluebeard's private secrets alone. This shift gives Judith a place within the history she seeks to uncover and makes the journey an ordeal of mutual recognition. The production's eventual reconciliation is deliberately troubling: darkness becomes the condition of a newly sustainable relationship, while the dead third party remains the foundation of their happiness. Such an ending invites reflection rather than offering uncomplicated reassurance.

The production's casting concept adds a particularly eloquent connection through Asmik Grigorian's assumption of both Bianca and Judith. Two very different dramatic identities become linked by the same artist, reinforcing the evening's exploration of continuity beneath transformation. The Staatsoper also identifies Christopher Maltman as Simone and Florian Boesch as Bluebeard: contrasting male roles through which the production examines jealousy, concealment and the perilous desire to possess another human being.

There is considerable artistic value, too, in restoring these works to a house where both have had remarkably limited histories. Their return offers an encounter with two distinctive musical imaginations and a directorial argument worth debating. This is the double bill's achievement: it makes revelation itself dramatic, asking whether love survives through knowledge, denial or an uneasy accommodation between the two. Elegant in conception and rich in psychological implications, the production proposes an operatic evening of exceptional substance, whose darkness is not merely atmospheric but profoundly human.

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Redaktion und Verantwortlichkeit:

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

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