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Ressort: Kunst, Kultur und Musik

Evening Sun

Jugendstil Theater, 14.11.2025 [ENA]

In Abendsonne (lit. “Evening Sun”), we are invited into a melancholic, ironically tinted chamber-opera world set in a retirement residence named Residenz Abendsonne. Here, aging, mortality, rebirth and the fraught intersections between generations play out in a setting at once mundane and metaphysical. The production opens with a group of elderly residents at the final stop of their lives.

Yet from this stillness arises an incipient chaos when one resident, a retired physician, receives a cancer diagnosis and begins to plot his “rebirth” with the aid of friends and a young caregiver. The libretto by Kristine Tornquist features a layered structure, with three interwoven stories or “time-realms”: the not yet born, the living and the dead. These domains converge in the residence’s liminal space: young and old living souls, evoked memories of the dead and the incipient existence of the unborn meet in a setting that lies between existence and non-existence.

Time in Abendsonne is non-linear and elastic; the boundaries between childhood, birth, life and death blur and the aging protagonists attempt to negotiate the passage of time with varying degrees of humour, denial and insight. In this way the retirement home becomes a micro-world of the human life-cycle, including its grotesque, absurd and tragic dimensions. Composer Tomasz Skweres calls the work “a tragicomedy of survival” and notes that the score deliberately draws on references from operatic and stylistic traditions—to give musical shape to the unstoppable advance of time.

Musically and theatrically, Abendsonne distinguishes itself by its hybridity and its constant oscillation between seriousness and absurdity. The instrumentation is chamber-sized: the ensemble includes flute, clarinet, saxophone, horn, trombone, accordion, harp, strings and two percussionists. Such instrumentation allows for an intimate yet richly textured sonic world, well-suited to the opera’s psychological interiority and shifting registers. Skweres’s approach integrates stylistic allusions—moments that evoke classical opera, baroque or nineteenth-century techniques—yet twisted through a modern lens.

He explains that the frequent “quick switches between grotesque, absurd motives and tragic-dramatic moments” are emblematic of the work’s dramaturgy. In other words: the audience is frequently unsettled, moved and amused all at once. The staging, under Tornquist’s direction, further heightens this effect. The set by Markus Liszt and Michael Liszt situates the narrative in the Jugendstiltheater am Steinhof (the performance venue) and uses an environment that is simultaneously sterile and uncanny: a retirement

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residence suffused with theatricality.

Choreography by Bärbel Strehlau and the video-programming by Germano Milite add layers of movement and mediated presence, transforming the residence into a stage of temporal flux, where past, present and future swirl together. The costumes by Nora Scheidl and the light design by Alexander Wanko further reinforce the thematic contrasts: aging vs freshness, routine vs revelation, stillness vs motion. One of the most compelling aspects of Abendsonne is how it addresses aging and death not as mere melancholia but as a terrain of humour, absurdity and possibility. The idea of the retired doctor plotting a “rebirth” in the last stage of life opens a space for reflection about agency, transformation and what remains possible even as time runs out.

The libretto’s language and the musical score work in tandem to create an atmosphere that is at once intimate and expansive. Tornquist’s text refuses sentimental comfort, instead placing its characters in off-kilter dialogues, monologues and choral fragments that range from reflective to comic to surreal. The composer’s score mirrors this: at times the music seems to quote or evoke familiar operatic tropes, but these citations are bent or disrupted; what feels like a waltz may lurch into a percussive interjection, a lyrical passage may yield to an outburst of dissonance. The interplay of tradition and innovation thus becomes a meta-reflection on time itself: musical history folded into the present, much as the elderly and youthful figures.

Skweres himself comments that his musical allusions serve the main theme of the opera: age and the “uncompromising, unstoppable progression of time.” In terms of audience impact, Abendsonne is a dense, thought-provoking experience rather than light entertainment. It asks its listeners to engage with existential questions, to tolerate ambiguity, to recognise their own place in the flux of living and dying. Yet it does so without moralising: the opera’s absurd and grotesque moments open space for laughter and release. For instance, the interplay between the retirees and the young caregivers retains a quasi-farce quality—even as deeper issues of illness, mortality and renewal are on the table.

This tonal fluidity is one of the opera’s strongest cards: it keeps the audience off balance, never allowing a single register to dominate. he chamber scale ensures clarity of voices and the possibility for theatrical nuance: the intimate instrumentation means the audience is drawn into a lived-in space rather than distant spectacle. The production team—musical leader Antanina Kalechyts, the ensemble PHACE, and the full creative team including video, choreography, costume and lighting—bring this vision into focused realization.

Moreover, the opera’s placement within the Wien Modern 2025 programme situates it in a context of contemporary innovation. It exemplifies how modern opera can be relevant—addressing our demographic

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realities (aging societies), institutional spaces (nursing homes), bio-ethical questions (terminal illness, rebirth), and generational relations—all while using a rich musical language that dialogues with opera's past. For a festival dedicated to "Neue Musik" and experimental forms, Abendsonne offers an accessible but intellectually rigorous gateway: its story is clear, its characters recognisable, yet its structure and sound challenge the audience.

One might critique the work for its density—some listeners may find the rapid shifts between tragic and comic, or the layered time realms, disorienting. The frequent allusions to operatic history risk distracting those not familiar with such tropes. However, these same features reward repeated listening and reflection. The staging's mixture of video and choreography may divert attention from the musical line at times, yet this interdisciplinarity is arguably in tune with the opera's theme of temporal interweaving and life-cycle convergence. In sum, Abendsonne stakes a claim for an opera of our times: not reliant on grand spectacle or traditional "historical" narrative, but rooted in an intimate institutional space.

In conclusion, Abendsonne stands out as a bold and thoughtful contribution to contemporary opera. It locates its drama in the familiar and the final—an elderly home—but opens that space to expansive reflection on life, death, time and what comes after. Through Tornquist's incisive text and Skweres's richly allusive music, the audience is invited into a liminal realm where generations meet, where absurdity and dignity coexist, and where the "evening sun" of life may also harbour the promise of something beyond. For anyone interested in the evolving forms of opera, in how music theatre can engage the most fundamental human questions today, Abendsonne is an opera to watch, listen and reflect upon.

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