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Ressort: Kunst, Kultur und Musik

## Epic Spectacle: Aida Shines at St. Margarethen Quarry

St. Margarethen Quarry, 11.08.2024 [ENA]

The St. Margarethen Quarry, a place of raw natural beauty and steeped in historical significance, once again played host to a grand operatic production that defied expectations and left the audience breathless. This summer, Giuseppe Verdi's *Aida* was brought to life in this remarkable setting, seamlessly blending the ancient Egyptian world of the Pharaohs with modern artistic innovation.

Under the expert guidance of director Thaddeus Strassberger and conductor Iván López-Reynoso, the performance was nothing short of a masterpiece, an immersive experience that will be remembered for years to come. The setting itself is awe-inspiring. Nestled between the Leitha Mountains and the expansive Neusiedler See, the UNESCO World Heritage site of St. Margarethen Quarry provides a backdrop unlike any other. The natural rock formations and the expansive open sky created an ethereal atmosphere that enhanced the story's ancient Egyptian themes. It is not merely a venue; it is an integral part of the performance, with the rugged landscape perfectly complementing the grandeur and drama of Verdi's opera.

The production's set design was an extraordinary blend of historical accuracy and imaginative interpretation. Gigantic statues reminiscent of the great monuments of Luxor and Karnak loomed over the stage, their imposing presence lending an air of authenticity and scale that transported the audience directly into the heart of ancient Egypt. The use of lighting was particularly noteworthy; as the sun set and the evening grew darker, the statues seemed to come alive, bathed in golden hues that shifted to ominous reds during moments of tension and conflict.

Yet, it was the innovative use of special effects that truly set this production apart. The production team succeeded in incorporating elements of spectacle that would rival even the most ambitious cinematic endeavors. One of the most striking features was the use of water on stage. A grand fountain was strategically placed to symbolize the Nile, the lifeblood of Egypt, and at various points in the opera, it erupted into a dazzling display of water jets choreographed to the music. This not only added a visual delight but also symbolized the flow of destiny that carries the characters towards their tragic fates.

Equally mesmerizing was the integration of fireworks, which were used not merely as a final flourish but as an integral part of the storytelling. During the triumphant return of Radames, played by the exceptional Hovhannes Ayvazyan, the night sky was suddenly ablaze with fireworks, symbolizing the jubilation of the victorious army and the awe of the Egyptian people. The timing was impeccable, with bursts of color

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punctuating the high notes of Verdi's score, creating a synesthetic experience where sound and sight melded into one.

But perhaps the most surprising and exhilarating element of the evening was the incorporation of circus-like performances. Show Talent Network, a group renowned for their high-caliber stunt work, brought a level of physical artistry rarely seen in opera. Their daring acrobatics and feats of strength were seamlessly woven into the fabric of the narrative. In the scene depicting the celebration of Egypt's victory, acrobats soared through the air, executing breathtaking flips and spins, symbolizing the ecstatic joy of the people and the dizzying heights of Radames' newfound glory. These performances were not mere embellishments; they were deeply integrated into the choreography, serving as a physical manifestation of the opera's emotions.

Of course, at the heart of this spectacular production were the performances of the principal singers, most notably Hovhannes Ayvazyan as Radames and Sofija Petrovic as Amneris. Ayvazyan's portrayal of Radames was nothing short of heroic. His tenor voice, powerful yet imbued with a haunting vulnerability, captured the complexity of a man torn between duty and love. From the opening aria "Celeste Aida," Ayvazyan commanded the stage, his voice soaring effortlessly over the orchestra, filled with passion and a poignant sense of destiny. His chemistry with Aida, though only hinted at through furtive glances and subtle gestures, was palpable, adding a layer of tragic inevitability to their doomed romance.

Sofija Petrovic, as the proud and tormented Amneris, delivered a performance of extraordinary emotional depth. Her mezzo-soprano voice was rich and expressive, capturing the full range of Amneris' character—from her initial regal poise to the fiery jealousy that ultimately consumes her. Petrovic's rendition of the Act IV aria "L'aborrita rivale a me sfuggia" was a standout moment of the evening. Her voice, filled with rage and desperation, echoed through the quarry, and her physical performance—trembling with suppressed emotion—made Amneris' inner turmoil devastatingly real. Petrovic's Amneris was not merely a woman scorned but a tragic figure who, in her quest for love, finds herself caught in the cruel machinery of power and politics.

The interplay between Ayvazyan and Petrovic was electric, particularly in the final act where their conflicting desires come to a head. The intensity of their performances, combined with the grandeur of the setting and the visceral impact of the special effects, created a climax that was both overwhelming and cathartic. The audience was left not just watching but experiencing the opera, fully immersed in the tragedy unfolding before them.

The supporting cast was equally impressive, with each performer bringing depth and nuance to their roles. The chorus, a crucial element in *Aida*, was superbly managed by López-Reynoso, whose conducting was

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precise and passionate. The ensemble scenes, such as the famous Triumphal March, were executed with a grandeur befitting the scale of the production. The musicians, performing in an open-air environment that can often pose challenges for acoustics, delivered a flawless performance, their sound resonating powerfully against the natural amphitheater of the quarry.

What made this production of Aida particularly memorable was its ability to balance spectacle with substance. The visual and auditory extravagance was never at the expense of the emotional core of Verdi's opera. On the contrary, the special effects and circus elements served to enhance the story, drawing the audience deeper into the world of ancient Egypt and the timeless human dramas of love, jealousy, and sacrifice.

In conclusion, the St. Margarethen Quarry's production of Aida was a triumph on every level. The combination of extraordinary performances, innovative stagecraft, and a setting of unparalleled beauty made for an operatic experience that was both exhilarating and profoundly moving. Hovhannes Ayvazyan's Radames and Sofija Petrovic's Amneris will surely go down as definitive interpretations of their roles, while the production as a whole set a new standard for what outdoor opera can achieve. This was more than just a performance; it was an event—a celebration of art, history, and human emotion in its most grand and glorious form.

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