



Ressort: Kunst, Kultur und Musik

## A Triumph of Love and Tragedy

Vienna State Opera, 15.09.2024 [ENA]

The recent production of the Charles Gounod's *Roméo et Juliette* at the Vienna State Opera was an extraordinary artistic achievement, combining impeccable musical direction, inspired performances, and innovative staging that captivated the audience from the very first note to the tragic conclusion. This was a five-act opera, based on the timeless Shakespearean tragedy.

The performance was brought to life under the brilliant musical leadership of Bertrand de Billy and the visionary staging of Jürgen Flimm. Together, they delivered a performance that was emotionally rich, visually stunning, and deeply faithful to Gounod's lyrical, intimate approach to the famous tale of star-crossed lovers. From the first strains of the overture, it was clear that Bertrand de Billy had an exceptional grasp of Gounod's score.

His conducting was not only precise but full of emotional depth, bringing out the tenderness and tragedy inherent in the music. De Billy's sensitivity to the singers, as well as his attention to the balance between the orchestra and the stage, allowed the lyrical beauty of the opera to shine through in every scene. The Wiener Staatsoper Orchestra, renowned for its lush sound and technical brilliance, responded to de Billy's direction with warmth and clarity, making Gounod's score come alive with passion and intensity.

One of the highlights of the evening was the seamless interplay between the orchestra and the singers during the famous duets between *Roméo* and *Juliette*. The balance achieved here was remarkable—allowing the singers to float over the orchestral textures while maintaining the full richness of Gounod's orchestration. De Billy's ability to shape the phrases with such care ensured that every musical nuance was articulated, giving the audience a deeply moving interpretation of one of opera's most beloved love stories.

In a world where tragic love stories have been told and retold through the ages, few remain as timeless and emotionally resonant as Charles Gounod's *Roméo et Juliette*. And yet, every now and then, a production comes along that not only breathes new life into the familiar tale, but soars beyond expectations with performances that captivate both the heart and the soul. Such was the case in this production, where Nadine Sierra and Saimir Pirgu delivered what can only be described as masterclasses in operatic artistry.

From the very first moment Nadine Sierra took the stage as *Juliette*, the audience was transported into a

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world of youthful innocence and boundless passion. Sierra's portrayal was both luminous and grounded, an exquisite blend of vocal prowess and emotional depth. Juliette's famous waltz aria, "Je veux vivre," is one of the opera's most iconic moments, and Sierra's rendition was nothing short of breathtaking. Her voice soared effortlessly through the shimmering high notes, embodying Juliette's dreams and desires with a thrilling purity. But beyond the technical perfection, what truly set Sierra apart was the joy and vitality she infused into the character.

She portrayed a young woman not just filled with love, but with a zest for life, and her playful, sparkling interpretation of this aria was contagious. The audience could feel her exuberance, her wish to live freely, and they responded with rapturous applause. As the opera progressed and the love story deepened, Sierra's portrayal of Juliette evolved with an impressive dramatic arc. The transformation from carefree girl to tragic heroine was seamless, and Sierra captured every nuance of Juliette's emotional journey. Her voice, delicate and agile in the first acts, grew with intensity as her character's fate became entangled in the inevitable tragedy.

In the duet scenes with Saimir Pirgu as Roméo, particularly their tender "Nuit d'hyménée," Sierra's voice blended beautifully with his, creating moments of pure musical magic. Their chemistry was palpable; each phrase they sang felt like an intimate conversation, a declaration of love that transcended mere notes on a page. Sierra's ability to switch from light-hearted playfulness to deep emotional intensity was astonishing, and it is this versatility that made her Juliette so compelling. Her performance in the final scene was nothing short of heart-wrenching. As she sang "Amour, ranime mon courage," her voice was filled with a delicate fragility that conveyed the full weight of Juliette's despair and determination.

Her final moments on stage were so filled with raw emotion that the entire theater seemed to collectively hold its breath. The silence that followed was not just a reflection of respect, but of the sheer emotional impact she had left on every person in the audience. Opposite Nadine Sierra, Saimir Pirgu brought a radiant and heroic presence to the role of Roméo. From the very first note of his entrance aria, "Ah! lève-toi, soleil!" it was clear that Pirgu was a force to be reckoned with. His rich, lyric tenor filled the hall with warmth and passion, his phrasing sensitive and nuanced. Roméo's longing for Juliette was palpable, and Pirgu's voice conveyed that yearning with a depth that made the character's plight all the more tragic.

He brought a sincerity to Roméo that was deeply touching, making the audience believe in the purity of his love for Juliette. What made Pirgu's performance particularly remarkable was the balance he struck between the ardent lover and the tormented soul. His Roméo was not just a figure swept away by passion, but a man grappling with the weight of his decisions and the consequences of his love. In scenes where Roméo is conflicted, torn between love and duty, Pirgu's acting was as effective as his singing. His physicality, the way he moved across the stage, expressed Roméo's inner turmoil in a way that words alone

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could not.

And yet, when he sang, it was as though every emotion came pouring out, his voice colored by the full spectrum of human feeling. Pirgu's duets with Sierra were some of the most electrifying moments of the evening. Their voices intertwined with such effortless beauty that it felt as though they were truly two halves of a whole. In the "Nuit d'hyménée," their vocal lines seemed to melt into one another, creating a sound that was both intimate and transcendent. And in the final tomb scene, Pirgu's performance reached its emotional zenith. As Roméo realizes Juliette is still alive, the shock and heartbreak in his voice was almost unbearable to witness.

His cries of despair, followed by his final tender farewell to Juliette, left the audience in tears. What was most striking about Pirgu's Roméo was the sheer humanity he brought to the role. He did not play Roméo as an idealized lover, but as a real, flawed person caught in extraordinary circumstances. This added a layer of complexity to the character that made his journey all the more poignant. His final moments on stage were as gut-wrenching as Sierra's, and together, they created a conclusion to the opera that will be remembered for years to come.

Of course, the success of the production was not solely due to its two leads, though they certainly were its shining stars. The supporting cast was excellent, each member bringing depth and vibrancy to their roles, from the fiery Mercutio to the stern yet compassionate Friar Laurence. The chorus added to the overall grandeur of the production, their voices swelling in the ensemble scenes with power and precision. The conductor's sensitive and well-paced direction of the orchestra provided a perfect foundation for the singers, bringing out the lush beauty of Gounod's score while never overwhelming the vocal lines. The set and costume design were visually stunning, evoking the timelessness of Verona with a rich palette of colors and textures.

But at the heart of this production were Nadine Sierra and Saimir Pirgu. Together, they breathed new life into these iconic roles, creating performances that were as fresh as they were deeply felt. Sierra's radiant voice and Pirgu's passionate tenor complemented each other perfectly, and their on-stage chemistry was nothing short of magical. Both artists gave performances that were not only technically brilliant, but emotionally profound, reminding the audience why Roméo et Juliette remains one of the most beloved operas in the repertoire.

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