



Ressort: Auto und Motorsport

Harrowing, Hypnotic Triumph of Contemporary Opera

Theater an der Wien, 14.06.2025 [ENA]

Miroslav Srnka and Tom Holloway's compelling new opera *Voice Killer*, directed by Cordula Däuper, marks a daring milestone in the 2024-25 season at the Theater an der Wien. This world premiere, conducted by Finnegan Downie Dear and performed by Klangforum Wien, melds true-crime storytelling with avant-garde musical drama—emerging as one of the most potent and emotionally fierce new operas in recent memory.

Voice Killer recounts the chilling tale of a WWII soldier stationed at a U.S. base in Australia, tormented by obsession with his deceased mother's voice. Srnka's composition and Holloway's libretto chart a harrowing psychological descent: the soldier's desperate search through random female voices leads to three tragic killings before his capture. What distinguishes this work is its empathetic lens turned onto the victims—three women drawn into the killer's echo chamber not by chance, but by their voices, which themselves become advocacy and testimony as the narrative folds victims into his defence. It transforms a grisly true story into a layered meditation on identity, obsession, and the human voice.

Srnka's score mirrors the schizophrenic architecture of the protagonist's mind—tempo, tonality, and instrumentation shift without warning. Klangforum Wien, under Downie Dear, powerfully navigates these transitions, blending visceral electronics with classical timbres. Moments of dissonant stasis leap into piercing soprano or bass climaxes, mirroring the uncanny interplay between memory and reality. The orchestral timbres glow and grit in turn, reflecting an internal world cracking at the seams.

Cordula Däuper's direction embraces fragmentation. Stage designer Friedrich Eggert and costume designer Sophie du Vinage cultivate a minimalist palette: shifting platforms under stark lighting by Franz Tscheck create void-like tableaux, echoing the protagonist's fractured mind. Suited in neutral grey, the cast becomes an elemental extension of the score: figures emerging from darkness and disappearing again like sound waves—an operatic echo chamber given physical form. The staging is at once hypnotic and disorienting, an apt rendering of obsession rendered theatrical.

The cast delivers performances of fierce theatricality:

Seth Carico imbues the protagonist ("Private") with chilling duality: the boyish ache for maternal warmth transforms into predatory intensity. Carico's baritone navigates jagged melodic lines with disconcerting

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Annette-Kolb-Str. 16
D-85055 Ingolstadt
Telefon: +49 (0) 841-951. 99.660
Telefax: +49 (0) 841-951. 99.661
Email: contact@european-news-agency.com
Internet: european-news-agency.com

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intimacy—his voice a direct conduit to the character’s crumbling psyche.

Julian Hubbard (Gallo) and Caroline Wettergreen (Ivy/McGuffie) shine in their layered roles, offering sharp counterpoints that humanize the voices ensnared in the killer’s mindscape.

Holly Flack (Pauline/Military Cop) and Nadja Stefanoff (Gladys/Eddie’s Lawyer) extend the thematic layering: their testimonies bleed into the sonic courtroom of conscience, their vocal presence haunting in its juxtaposition against the protagonist’s inner chaos.

Performed in English with surtitles in both English and German, the production thoughtfully balances accessibility and conceptual depth. Holloway’s libretto is unflinchingly frank, yet leaves space for vocal abstraction—fragments of nursery rhymes, dislocated pleas, and screamed consonants. The surtitles enhance rather than anchor the experience, guiding the audience through the mental labyrinth without reducing its visceral impact.

Finnegan Downie Dear leads Klangforum Wien with crisp precision. He allows the score’s tension to rupture imperceptibly—silences stretch long, then snap into sudden intervals of symphonic disturbance. Each instrumental gesture becomes a psychological heartbeat: restless strings, metallic percussive bursts, distorted wind tones. The ensemble breathes as one organism, reflecting the protagonist’s waking nightmare through collective intensity. At its heart, *Voice Killer* is a meditation on voice as identity—lost, found, and weaponized. Srnka and Holloway invert the classical operatic voice: these women sing to survive, to testify, to live on through abstraction.

The murderer’s voice becomes both anchor and weapon—a warped replica of lost maternal tones. This thematic complexity lingers long after the performance ends. Spatially, the stage operates as acoustic topography. Eggert’s platforms and rails frame the movement of voices; Däuper’s direction treats light and shadow as vocal textures. Tscheck’s lighting design intensifies these transitions: warm, diffuse hues accompany memory sequences, while stark monochrome underscores the violence of reality. Costume and movement are economical but expressive—understated gestures carry volumes.

Following the premiere on June 13, 2025, the audience emerged into the night in near-silence—many visibly moved, others contemplative. The production isn’t for the faint-hearted, but it is undeniably arresting. It leaves one confronting the ethics of empathy, the fragility of memory, and the weaponization of the human voice. In the context of 21st-century opera, *Voice Killer* stands with works like Saariaho’s *L’Amour de Loin* and Adès’s *The Exterminating Angel*: theatrical, psychologically penetrating compositions that challenge narrative and formal convention. Here, though, the visceral horror of a

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true-crime narrative is transmuted into art—not sensationalism.

Voice Killer is an opera that strikes at the core of what we expect from the art form: it is emotionally raw, intellectually bold, and formally daring. Srnka’s music, Holloway’s libretto, Däuper’s direction, and Downie Dear’s conducting coalesce into a work of intense emotional clarity. The protagonists are not mere characters—they are voices in extremis, sculpted by trauma and obsession. The result is unforgettable, unfathomable, and ultimately humane: an operatic experience that listens deeply to the echoes of human suffering and the possibility of redemption through empathy. For anyone seeking a new opera that’s both innovative and emotionally resonant, Voice Killer is essential—a profound statement on identity.

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Annette-Kolb-Str. 16
D-85055 Ingolstadt
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