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Grace in the Shadow of the Guillotine

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Francis Poulenc's Dialogues des Carmélites is one of the rare miracles of 20th-century opera: at once austere and emotionally overwhelming, modern in musical language yet deeply rooted in tradition. At the Vienna State Opera, in Magdalena Fuchsberger's production conducted by Robin Ticciati, the work emerges as a shining example of what a great repertory house can achieve when theatrical daring and musical refinement

This performance, with its outstanding cast headed by Olga Kulchynska as Blanche and Bogdan Volkov as her brother, offers an evening of opera that is both intellectually rigorous and viscerally moving. Poulenc based his only full-length opera on Georges Bernanos' drama, itself derived from Gertrud von Le Fort's novella about the sixteen Carmelites of Compiègne, executed during the Reign of Terror. The piece focuses less on politics than on the interior landscape of fear and faith, crystallised in the figure of Blanche de la Force, a young aristocrat who seeks refuge in the convent but cannot escape her terror of death.

Vienna State Opera's own materials emphasise that Poulenc is ultimately writing about "the fear of death" as the ultimate human theme, setting Blanche's journey against a historically verified framework. Fuchsberger's staging understands this immediately. Rather than an antiquarian reconstruction of late-18th-century France, she gives us a psychologically resonant space in which the opposing forces of terror and transcendence can play out. The production honours the specificity of the historical story while making its questions about conscience, courage and collective sacrifice feel disturbingly contemporary.

The visual heart of the production is Monika Biegler's striking wooden structure: a golden, lattice-like construction that serves by turns as aristocratic salon, convent, prison and scaffold. The set can rotate, revealing new levels and compartments; it suggests at once a half-finished building site and a fortress of the soul. This ambiguity is central to the staging's impact. We constantly see characters framed, hemmed in, or exposed, the architecture mirroring Blanche's shifting sense of safety and peril.

From the opera's opening scenes, with the Marquis's household overshadowed by social unrest, the space is alive with tension. The verticality of the structure allows for striking tableaux: the nuns elevated in prayer as the chaotic world below disintegrates, or the community reduced to scattered, vulnerable figures amid the bare wooden beams. The design's modern simplicity—no superfluous clutter, no fussy historical detail—throws our attention onto faces, gestures and, crucially, onto Poulenc's text-driven music.

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Valentin Köhler's costumes place the characters on a subtle spectrum between worldliness and renunciation. Blanche's progression from patterned dresses to the severe Carmelite habit is charted with unforced clarity; the nuns' black and white garments gain symbolic weight as the evening progresses, especially when accented by gold in the final scenes, hinting at sanctity hard-won through suffering. Aron Kitzig's video work and Rudolf Fischer's lighting design are not merely decorative. Projections—stained-glass motifs, religious imagery, and abstract patterns—appear like visual echoes of the characters' inner debates.

In the climactic Salve Regina and final procession to the guillotine, a glowing rose window and shafts of light transform the wooden framework into an almost apocalyptic cathedral. The guillotine is never crudely shown; instead, light and sound suggest its presence, allowing the imagination to complete the horror. This restraint makes the final sequence all the more devastating. Robin Ticciati is an ideal partner for Poulenc. Known for drawing playing of remarkable transparency and finesse from his orchestras, he favours clarity of texture, flexible phrasing and a strong sense of dramatic architecture. In Dialogues des Carmélites, these qualities pay rich dividends.

Poulenc's score inhabits a diatonic, neo-classical world, but it is constantly inflected by piquant harmonies, unexpected rhythms and a quasi-liturgical use of motif and chant. Ticciati allows these details to register without ever fragmenting the line. The orchestral introduction to Madame de Croissy's death scene, for example, is shaped in long, painful breaths, the strings' uneasy harmonies never overbalanced by the winds' acidic interjections. In the great ensemble scenes—the convent debates, the crowd scenes, the final procession—he achieves a remarkable balance between the pit and the stage, ensuring that Poulenc's sophisticated orchestration supports rather than overwhelms the vocal lines.

Under his baton, the Vienna State Opera Orchestra sounds both luminous and weighty, capable of sudden climaxes but also of chamber-like intimacy. The Monk's brief but crucial appearances are cloaked in a gently glowing sonority, while the Revolutionary episodes bite with brittle, almost satirical sharpness. The chorus, so central to this opera, is on magnificent form. Poulenc treats the nuns collectively as a spiritual protagonist; their prayers, fears and eventual act of communal courage are largely expressed through choral texture. Vienna's chorus sing with exemplary blend and diction, giving the Latin devotions a living, breathing urgency rather than mere ecclesiastical prettiness.

In the "Salve Regina" and "Ave verum corpus", the sound has a floating purity that contrasts poignantly with the increasingly dark orchestral backdrop. The final scene, with the nuns processing to their death, each fall of the guillotine marked by a sudden thinning of the choral texture, is here realised with flawless control. The diminuendo of voices as one sister after another "disappears" is handled so precisely that the audience experiences the physical shock of absence as much as the spiritual triumph that Poulenc builds

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into the music. At the centre of the evening stands Olga Kulchynska's Blanche de la Force.

The Ukrainian soprano has been widely praised for the warmth and sensitivity of her singing and for the voluptuous, richly coloured line that has made her one of the leading lyric sopranos of her generation. She brings all of these qualities to Blanche, but what impresses most is the psychological precision with which she charts the character's evolution.
Her first scenes show a Blanche almost paralysed by anxiety, the voice slightly veiled, phrases shortened as if cut off by fear. As she enters the convent, the timbre opens up, gaining radiance without losing its fragile core.

In her exchanges with Madame de Croissy and Mère Marie, Kulchynska shapes Poulenc's conversational lines with a lieder singer's care for text, letting little surges of intensity reveal the conflict between her desire for heroic sanctity and her terror of suffering.
In the final act, when Blanche reappears having fled the convent, the voice sounds freer yet also more grounded, as if she has passed through a crucible. Her final decision to join her sisters on the way to the scaffold is sung with a simple, almost conversational clarity that makes the moment all the more overwhelming.

Opposite Kulchynska, Bogdan Volkov makes an ideal Chevalier de la Force. Volkov has established himself internationally as a sought-after lyric tenor, admired for his controlled vibrato, elegant phrasing and emotional candour. His opening scene, in which he describes the violence on the streets of Paris, combines youthful ardour with genuine concern; he phrases Poulenc's long lines in a single breath, giving the music the sense of urgent narration it needs. Their later duet, when he begs Blanche to leave the convent, becomes one of the evening's most quietly devastating episodes: his bright, pleading tone set against her newly acquired stillness.

As Madame de Croissy, Sylvie Brunet-Grupposo offers a portrayal that moves far beyond the stereotype of the stern old prioress. Her mezzo-soprano—firm through the range yet capable of sudden, flickering vulnerability—anchors the first act. The death scene, that terrifying mixture of physical agony and spiritual crisis, is sung and acted with such commitment that it seems to set the moral stakes for the whole evening.
Michael Kraus, a stalwart of the Vienna ensemble, gives the Marquis a patrician warmth and genuine tenderness. He avoids any trace of caricature; his love for Blanche and his inability to protect her are drawn with touching specificity.

If Blanche is the opera's emotional heart, the theological and ethical debate is embodied by Mère Marie and Madame Lidoine, here superbly sung by Julie Boulianne and Maria Motolygina.
Boulianne, acclaimed internationally for the agility and expressive power of her dark-hued mezzo, makes

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Mère Marie a formidable yet deeply human figure. Vocally, she combines incisive diction with a burnished legato; the lines in which she argues for the community to embrace martyrdom carry real authority, yet she never collapses into fanaticism. In her private moments, especially her anguished recognition that she will not share the sisters' fate, Boulianne allows a raw, almost conversational vulnerability to emerge.

Motolygina, whose bright, powerful soprano has been noted in roles from Iolanta to Lisa and Turandot, brings a luminous authority to Madame Lidoine. She embodies a different spiritual path: humility, prudence, and an insistence on obedience rather than theatrical heroism. Her great prayer in the third act is shaped in long, arching lines, the upper register ringing but never forced; it becomes a genuine moment of intercession for the community rather than a showpiece aria. As Soeur Constance, Maria Nazarova is pure delight. Critics have praised her "feisty" soprano, sparkling coloratura and vivid stage presence, and all these qualities are on show here.

She captures Constance's blend of innocence and mysterious insight, her lightly comic surface shading into something far more profound as she speaks of a joyful, even playful, approach to death. Her scenes with Blanche are exquisitely judged; the contrast between Nazarova's airy brightness and Kulchynska's darker, more anxious sound creates exactly the tension Poulenc's dialogues require. Around them, the remaining sisters—Mutter Jeanne (Stephanie Maitland), Schwester Mathilde (Teresa Sales Rebordão) and others—form a richly characterised ensemble rather than a faceless chorus of nuns.

Jörg Schneider's Chaplain is drawn with gentle dignity, while the Revolutionary officials and townsfolk are sharply etched without ever tipping into broad caricature. In the last minutes of Dialogues des Carmélites, Poulenc achieves something almost impossible: he stages mass execution as a scene of serene, even exultant, faith without trivialising the horror. Fuchsberger, Ticciati and the entire company rise fully to this challenge. The stage fills with mist; the wooden structure glows like an immense, fragile reliquary. The nuns, in simple formation, sing the Salve Regina with a calm assurance that feels earned rather than imposed.

With each imagined fall of the guillotine, a voice drops away, the chorus thinning until only Blanche—and then silence—remains. The guillotine's slashing motif in the orchestra, which Poulenc builds directly into the score, is here integrated with absolute precision, never allowed to become a crude sound effect. When the final chord dies away, there is a moment of complete stillness in the house before the audience erupts. It is the reaction one hopes for but rarely gets in such an intense, contemplative work: not simply admiration for fine singing and staging, but a sense that something essential has been confronted.

This Vienna State Opera Dialogues des Carmélites production demonstrates why Poulenc's opera has come to be regarded as a modern classic: it can bear—and reward—this level of interpretative seriousness.

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Fuchsberger's staging, with Biegler's eloquent architectural set, Köhler's telling costumes, Kitzig's imaginative video and Fischer's sculptural lighting, offers a visual language that amplifies the work's themes rather than distracting from them. Musically, Robin Ticciati's nuanced, text-sensitive conducting, the superb playing of the orchestra, the disciplined and expressive chorus, and a cast led by Olga Kulchynska, Bogdan Volkov, Sylvie Brunet-Grupposo, Julie Boulianne, Maria Motolygina and Maria Nazarova combine into a rare power.

Far from feeling like a museum piece, Dialogues des Carmélites in Vienna speaks directly to our own age of anxiety and moral testing. For anyone fortunate enough to experience this performance, it is likely to remain not only as one of the high points of the season, but as a benchmark of how profoundly opera can illuminate the most difficult questions of human existence—and offer, if not easy answers, then at least a glimpse of courage, solidarity and grace.

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