



Ressort: Kunst, Kultur und Musik

Lost Viennese Comedy Reawakened in Český Krumlov

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There are revivals, and then there are genuine acts of musical recovery. The modern-world premiere of Antonio Draghi's *Lo Smemorato* (The Forgetful One) at the Baroque Castle Theatre in Český Krumlov belongs emphatically to the latter category. Performed from 18 to 20 September 2026 as part of the town's Festival of Baroque Arts, this production brings back to the stage a comic opera last heard at the Habsburg court in Vienna during the carnival of 1683. In the particular historical and theatrical surroundings of Český Krumlov, this rare event becomes more than an excavation of an obscure score: it offers a vivid encounter with the operatic imagination of the Leopoldine era and with a composer who was once among the most celebrated figures in European musical life.

Antonio Draghi, born in Rimini in 1634, made his career at the imperial court in Vienna, where he arrived in 1658 and remained until his death in 1700. His trajectory was exceptional. First engaged as a bass singer in the musical establishment of the Dowager Empress Eleonora Gonzaga, he rose through the court's hierarchy to become vice-maestro, then maestro di cappella, director of theatrical music, and finally the imperial court's Kapellmeister. His output was vast: more than 150 stage works, including operas, serenatas, and oratorios.

Yet despite this astonishing productivity and centrality to Habsburg musical culture, Draghi has remained far less familiar to modern audiences than his Italian contemporaries or the later Baroque masters who inherited the operatic world he helped to build. *Lo Smemorato* provides an ideal opportunity to reconsider his importance. It was conceived as a *trattenimento musicale*, a comic entertainment, and first performed at the Viennese Hofburg on 28 February 1683 by the musicians of Emperor Leopold I.

Its libretto was written by Nicolò Minato, the court poet whose collaboration with Draghi was central to the development of imperial opera in Vienna. The work's rediscovery is therefore historically valuable not simply because it is rare, but because it illuminates a crucial moment in the formation of a distinct Viennese court style: Italian in language and musical foundations, yet shaped by Habsburg ceremonial culture, multilingual political identity, and the particular theatrical conditions of the imperial capital.

The title, *The Forgetful One*, immediately places the work within the world of Baroque comic dramaturgy, where unreliable memory, disguise, misunderstanding, social inversion, and emotional volatility generate theatrical motion. Baroque comedy often depends on the instability of identity. Characters forget,

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misrecognise, pretend, overhear, and deceive; the resulting confusions reveal the fragility of social hierarchy and the irrationality of desire. In *Lo Smemorato*, the comic premise promises not merely farce but a refined theatrical investigation of memory itself: what happens when a character cannot—or will not—remember the obligations, promises, and identities that make social life possible?

The production's setting makes this question especially compelling. The Baroque Castle Theatre at Ceský Krumlov is not a modern reconstruction or a neutral historical backdrop. It is one of the world's most precious surviving eighteenth-century theatre spaces, preserving the visual and technical world of historical stage practice. Its machinery, painted scenery, spatial proportions, and relationship between performers and audience provide an unusually direct route into the aesthetic imagination of the period.

To encounter Draghi's music there is to understand that Baroque opera was never intended to be experienced as sound alone. It was an art of transformed space: a theatre in which forests, palaces, gardens, prisons, heavens, and comic domestic interiors could appear through the rapid manipulation of scenery, light, gesture, costume, and music. The artistic team is admirably suited to this task. The performance is directed from the harpsichord by Ondrej Macek, whose work in historical performance and Baroque theatrical practice has made him one of the essential figures in the Czech early-music scene.

The Baroque orchestra Hof-Musici supplies the musical foundation, while the dance ensemble Epochal Dances, with choreography by Veronika Rehbergerová, restores an element too often marginalised in modern operatic revivals. In the seventeenth-century court theatre, dance was not decorative surplus; it was a language of rank, emotion, transformation, and spectacle. The inclusion of ballet music by Andreas Anton Schmelzer therefore enriches the performance structurally and historically.

Equally important is the stage direction and work on Baroque gesture by Zuzana Vrbová. Gesture in seventeenth-century opera was not an artificial code imposed upon feeling; it was a means of making feeling legible. The body, like the voice, was understood as an instrument of rhetoric. A hand, a turn of the head, a controlled posture, or a shift in gaze could clarify a character's emotional state with a precision that modern naturalism often overlooks. In a comic opera such as *Lo Smemorato*, this stylised physical vocabulary can also sharpen timing, define social contrast, and transform the mechanics of misunderstanding into a sophisticated visual game.

The rarity of the work gives the evening an additional emotional charge. In the Baroque era, courtly musical dramas were generally designed for a specific occasion and were not routinely revived. Once the carnival, wedding, name day, diplomatic visit, or court celebration had passed, the work could vanish from performance history. *Lo Smemorato* was therefore not forgotten because it lacked value; it belonged to a system in which theatrical works were often consumed by the moment for which they had been created.

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The Krumlov production is only the second performance in the opera's history, a fact that changes the listener's relationship to every aria, ensemble, dance, and recitative.

This is precisely what makes the revival so significant. It does not simply add another title to the ever-expanding catalogue of Baroque rediscoveries. It restores a missing chapter in the story of Viennese opera before the age of Mozart, and it allows an audience to hear the theatrical voice of a composer who helped define the musical culture of Emperor Leopold I's court. In the magical historical setting of Český Krumlov, Lo Smemorato promises to be not a museum piece, but a living proof that the Baroque repertoire remains far richer, stranger, funnier, and more emotionally various than the familiar canon suggests.

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