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Ressort: Kunst, Kultur und Musik

### Judith and Holofernes

Festival Retz, 11.07.2026 [ENA]

The Festival Retz production of Judith & Holofernes presents Alessandro Scarlatti's rarely heard baroque opera as a gripping "polit-thriller" set within charged sacred space of the Stadtpfarrkirche St. Stephan in Retz. Performed in an international top-class cast and in a newly reconstructed original version from 1697, the evening transforms a familiar biblical story into a sharply contemporary reflection on power.

The opera unfolds at a moment of existential crisis: the Babylonians, led by their cruel commander Holofernes, stand before the gates of Jerusalem, and the political leadership of Israel is paralysed, seriously contemplating unconditional surrender. Against this backdrop of fear and hesitation, Judith—a woman from among the people—swears over the body of her husband, fallen in battle, that she will take the fate of her nation into her own hands. With her old nurse, she infiltrates the enemy camp and, using the "weapons of a woman", seduces and ultimately kills Holofernes.

What the Bible hands down as a heroic deed, this production deliberately reframes as a political assassination whose moral complexity is not easily resolved. Intendant Christian Baier and director Hartmut Schörghofer emphasise that "the reality of an assassination looks quite different", inviting the audience to reflect on the costs of violent resistance, even when undertaken in the name of collective salvation. Scarlatti's music, with its focus on "people of flesh and blood rather than operatic templates" and on music as a vehicle for eruptive passions, becomes an ideal medium for probing these ambiguities.

Schörghofer, who also designs the stage, transforms the architecture of St. Stephan's church into a kind of envelope for a political attack, weaving together analogue and multimedia forms of representation. The baroque interior is not merely a picturesque backdrop; it is activated as a resonant space in which the tension between faith, ritual and violence is constantly felt. Light, projections and sculptural elements interact with the existing structure, so that the audience experiences the story simultaneously as an Old Testament narrative and as a commentary on contemporary crises.

Costumes by Corinna Crome play a crucial role in this double perspective. They locate Judith, her nurse and Holofernes within a recognisable baroque world, yet are sharpened by details that suggest modern political iconography—reminding us that the dynamics of power, seduction and moral decision-making are not confined to distant history. The visual language thus reinforces the festival's overarching motto "HANDELN!" ("Act!"), underscoring that this is a story about choosing action over paralysis, even when

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the consequences are fraught.

Musically, *Judith & Holofernes* is shaped by chief conductor Luca De Marchi, a recognised baroque specialist who leads the Ensemble Continuum Wien. Under his baton, Scarlatti's score reveals its rich palette of affects—tenderness, dread, fervour, doubt—through finely articulated phrasing and a clear sense of dramatic contour. De Marchi's approach highlights the opera's structural intelligence without sacrificing emotional immediacy, allowing arias and ensembles to function as intense psychological monologues as much as as vehicles of plot.

The cast is anchored by the Italian soprano Carolina Lippo in the title role of Judith. Her portrayal must carry the full weight of a woman torn between personal grief, national duty and the intimate proximity to the man she has vowed to kill. Lippo's vocal agility and expressive range make her an ideal interpreter of Scarlatti's writing, which demands both virtuosic control and a capacity to convey rapidly shifting emotional states.

Chiara Brunello as the nurse offers a vital counter-voice—earthy, cautious, deeply humane—through which the audience can access the ethical contours of Judith's mission. Brunello's presence grounds the more extreme moments of the plot, reminding us that behind every political act lies a web of care, counsel and doubt. As *Holofernes*, Luigi Morassi makes his debut in Retz, embodying the commander not simply as a villain, but as a complex figure whose charisma, vulnerability under seduction and ultimate downfall are rendered in multi-layered fashion.

The Ensemble Continuum Wien provides a supple instrumental foundation that responds sensitively to the singers and the acoustics of the church space. Their playing ensures that the baroque idiom remains vivid and transparent, with continuo textures and string colours framing the vocal lines in a way that supports both clarity of text and intensity of feeling. Festival Retz surrounds *Judith & Holofernes* with contextual programmes, including introductions 45 minutes before each performance and the post-show “Brot & Wein” gatherings, which extend reflection into shared conversation. This framing emphasises that the opera is not only an aesthetic event, but part of a wider discourse on faith, hope, resistance and the ethics of “acting”.

As a whole, *Judith & Holofernes* at Festival Retz stands out as a rare chance to encounter Scarlatti's politically charged masterpiece in a setting that amplifies its themes at every level—musical, visual, architectural and conceptual. With Christian Baier's intendant vision, Luca De Marchi's musical leadership, Hartmut Schörghofer's direction and stage, Corinna Crome's costumes, and the committed performances of Carolina Lippo, Chiara Brunello, Luigi Morassi and Ensemble Continuum Wien, the production offers a powerful meditation on what it means to take action when history presses hardest.

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