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Samson and Dalila

Oper im Kaiserhof Klosterneuburg, 08.07.2026 [ENA]

In the summer of 2026, the Oper Klosterneuburg brings Camille Saint-Saëns' Samson und Dalila to the Kaiserhof of Stift Klosterneuburg under the artistic direction of Thomas Rösner and in the atmospheric setting of the monastery's baroque courtyard, shaping a monumental French opera into a vivid open-air experience that fuses musical grandeur with architectural splendour.

This production promises an evening where biblical drama, vocal virtuosity and refined staging coalesce into a compelling whole. Saint-Saëns' opera, among the most impressive works of the French repertoire, recounts the story of Samson, the divinely empowered leader of the Hebrews, whose calling to liberate his people is undone by his fatal love for Dalila. The Klosterneuburg production embraces this tension between spiritual mission and human desire, emphasizing the emotional depth of the central triangle: Samson, torn between duty and passion; Dalila, the seductive agent of destruction; and the Oberpriester des Dagon, embodiment of political and religious opposition.

The choice of the Kaiserhof as performance space is conceptually resonant. The cloistered architecture—open to the sky yet enclosed by monastery walls—mirrors the opera's oscillation between collective ritual and private intrigue. Mass scenes, prayers and conspiracies gain an added spatial dimension in this environment, while moments of intimate encounter between Samson and Dalila acquire a heightened, almost cinematic focus amid the monumental stone and evening light.

Musically, the production is led by conductor Thomas Rösner, whose experience with large-scale repertoire positions him well to draw out both the orchestral radiance and the dramatic pacing of Saint-Saëns' score. With 2026 marking an important step for Oper Klosterneuburg—the establishment of its own orchestra, building on the ensemble Neue Streicher—the performance benefits from a dedicated instrumental body tailored to the acoustic and aesthetic demands of the Kaiserhof. The famous Bacchanale, Dalila's arias and the choral invocations thus unfold within a sound world designed specifically for this venue.

Stage director Mario Pavle del Monaco shapes the biblical material into a visually and dramaturgically coherent narrative that speaks to contemporary audiences without diluting the work's historical and religious specificity. His staging highlights the opera's central conflicts—faith versus power, liberation versus oppression, eros versus self-control—through clear spatial storytelling and character work. Set designer Hans Kudlich reinforces this with a scenic concept that respects the architecture of the Kaiserhof

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while introducing strong visual symbols: pillars of power, zones of confinement, and surfaces that can shift from temple solemnity to sensual allure as the drama demands.

At the heart of the production stands an international star ensemble. In the title role of Samson, Lithuanian tenor Kristian Benedikt brings the kind of heroic spinto voice and stage presence that the part demands. Known for his intense portrayals in roles such as Otello, Benedikt is well-suited to conveying Samson's arc from fervent leader to broken captive, negotiating both the soaring declamation of the early acts and the introspective, devastated colouring of the final scenes.

Opposite him, Dalila is sung by Margarita Gritskova, a mezzo-soprano already beloved by the Klosterneuburg audience from previous seasons—among them Adalgisa in Norma, Eboli in Don Carlo and the Muse in Les contes d'Hoffmann. Her familiarity with the venue and festival, combined with her rich timbre and dramatic intelligence, make her an ideal interpreter of Dalila's complex mixture of sensuality, calculation and latent vulnerability. The iconic arias "Printemps qui commence" and "Mon cœur s'ouvre à ta voix" are thus entrusted to a singer who can combine seductive line with psychological nuance.

The third major role, the Oberpriester des Dagon, is entrusted to Romanian baritone Serban Vasile. His presence anchors the Philistine side of the drama with authority and tonal weight, embodying religious and political power that is both charismatic and ruthless. Further roles, including Abimélech (Ivo Kovrigar) and the Vieillard hébreu (Felix Pacher), round out a cast that balances international profiles with artists closely linked to the Austrian scene. The Chor operklosterneuburg adds its collective voice as the people of both Hebrews and Philistines, giving choral scenes a vibrant, spatially immersive quality.

The festival's programming around Samson und Dalila is designed to make the work accessible to a broad audience. Beyond the main evening performances, an open rehearsal with introduction and meet-and-greet, as well as a specially adapted children's version on 19 July 2026—with Georg Wacks as the Friseur der Philister und Hebräer—invite families and younger visitors into the world of opera. In the children's performance, the drama is presented age-appropriately, even offering a "Happy End," which underscores Oper Klosterneuburg's commitment to educational outreach and playful engagement with canonical works.

Taken together, the 2026 Samson und Dalila at Oper Klosterneuburg promises a synthesis of musical excellence, thoughtful staging and distinctive venue atmosphere. By situating Saint-Saëns' masterpiece in the Kaiserhof of the Augustinian canons' abbey and assembling a strong artistic team—Thomas Rösner, Mario Pavle del Monaco, Hans Kudlich, Kristian Benedikt, Margarita Gritskova, Serban Vasile and the Chor operklosterneuburg—the festival positions this production as a summer highlight in the Austrian operatic landscape. It invites audiences to experience an age-old story of strength, seduction and downfall in a setting where stone, sky and sound conspire to make biblical tragedy feel vividly present.

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