

Music**Greek National Opera arrives on the international stage with *Wozzeck***

This production of Berg's opera challenges audiences with its resonance for today



From left, Peter Hoare, Tassis Christoyannis and Yanni Yannissis in '*Wozzeck*' © Gerasimos Domenikos

James Imam JANUARY 20 2020

When Greece's debt crisis erupted in 2015, the Stavros Niarchos Foundation built its €600m Culture Center (the SNFCC) anyway. Greek National Opera (GNO) moved in two years later and now, with a four-year grant of €20m, the company is raising its profile by expanding the repertoire, sourcing top soloists and taking on international co-productions. At the same time, by cultivating Greek singers, commissioning operas locally, launching a choir featuring refugees and keeping ticket prices low, it remains a company for the city.

This major new production of Alban Berg's *Wozzeck* is the first in the company's history. The production suggests that GNO intends to challenge audiences. Georg Büchner's original 1837 play depicting a common man crushed by social injustice speaks strongly today, and Olivier Py, doyen of French theatre, was unlikely to soften its message. The director presents *Wozzeck* in a shirt and tie, in a dark kitchen-sink drama that disparages society through the ages.

An apartment block revolves, revealing earthy detail within its labyrinthine interior including nude bodies, sex in starkly lit recesses and Marie washing the dishes. This mass of human activity, which feels rooted in the score, materialises gradually, like some unsavoury substance rising from the depths. Military costumes suggest Weimar Germany before the

Greek baritone Tassis Christoyannis, singing *Wozzeck* for the first time, makes a striking transformation from inert victim to lunatic murderer. Nadine Lehner's Marie is carnal and feral but smothered by the orchestra. Captain (Peter Hoare) is delightfully hysterical; Margret (Margarita Syngeniou) and the Drum Major (Peter Wedd) are more anonymous.

The chief driving force is conductor Vassilis Christopoulos, who combines glittering detail, rich post-romanticism and translucent textures to hypnotic effect, while always making the music's savage power rumble below the surface. Meaty playing leads to balance issues in the cherry-wood auditorium, yet the climb to the final howl of despair is thrilling. GNO currently has no music director. Christopoulos would surely do a fine job.

★★★★☆

To February 2, [nationalopera.gr](https://www.nationalopera.gr)

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