

# BIRGIT NILSSON PRIZE

## 2025 BIRGIT NILSSON PRIZE AWARDED TO FESTIVAL D'AIX-EN-PROVENCE

The world's largest classical music prize honours the Festival D'Aix-En-Provence for outstanding artistic achievements, giving special recognition to the 2021 premiere of Kaija Saariaho's Opera *Innocence*.

President of the Birgit Nilsson Stiftelsen, Susanne Rydén today announced that the 2025 Birgit Nilsson Prize – the world's largest prize in classical music at 1 million US dollars – is awarded to the **Festival d'Aix-en-Provence**. The prestigious French Opera Festival, which is currently preparing for its 77th edition this summer, becomes the first festival to receive the Prize, to be presented on October 21 by His Majesty King Carl XVI Gustaf at Konserthuset Stockholm.

Announcing the Prize **Susanne Rydén** said: The Board is proud to honour the Festival d'Aix-en-Provence with the 2025 Birgit Nilsson Prize for its outstanding artistic achievements and commitment to developing and commissioning new opera productions. With its forward-looking and multi-faceted programming the Festival has produced key milestones in contemporary masterpieces which have perpetuated the art form and added an important chapter to music history. Special recognition is given to the production of **Kaija Saariaho's opera *Innocence***, premiered at the Festival D'Aix-en-Provence in 2021."

"Today is both a moment of celebration and deep sadness, as the world mourns the loss of **Pierre Audi** who died suddenly earlier this month. As General Director of the Festival d'Aix-en-Provence since 2019, Pierre's artistic passion and dedication was truly inspirational and he was looking forward to celebrating this special honour, of which he was so proud to acknowledge on behalf of all those he worked with at the Festival d'Aix-en-Provence."

In advance of today's announcement Pierre Audi has prepared the following statement: "The Festival d'Aix-en-Provence is immensely grateful and humbled to have been chosen as the 2025 recipient of the prestigious Birgit Nilsson Prize. No words are warm enough to express our deepest thanks at receiving this wonderful honour, which comes at a momentous turning point in our 77-year history. The Birgit Nilsson Prize will help the Festival cross these challenging times, which have threatened its artistic course. The Prize will enable the Festival to continue its determined policy to create new works and stay an inspiring birthplace for new operas, as well as nurture the special synergy between innovation and quality that has been its trademark for many years."

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"The opera ***Innocence*** by the great Finnish composer **Kaija Saariaho** is a prime example of a work that has taken the world by storm. Nurtured and produced by the Festival d'Aix-en-Provence, this important work will have been seen across fifteen stages around the world in the space of a few years. This project stands as a living example of the contribution the Festival d'Aix-en-Provence has been able to make to the course of opera as a living art form we firmly believe is there to stay and evolve with our times."

Set to an original libretto by **Sofi Oksanen**, with dramaturgy and multilingual translation by **Aleksi Barrière**, *Innocence* was premiered at the 2021 Festival d'Aix-en-Provence, staged by **Simon Stone** to international acclaim. Finnish conductor, **Susanna Mälkki** led the **London Symphony Orchestra**, **Estonian Chamber Choir** and a cast of 13 soloists, featuring **Magdalena Kožená** and **Sandrine Piau** in the lead roles. A co-commission with the Dutch National Opera, Finnish National Opera, Royal Opera House Covent Garden and San Francisco Opera, *Innocence* has since been staged multiple times, most recently at the Semperoper Dresden and Adelaide Festival. The work receives its New York Metropolitan Opera premiere in April 2026.

In addition to a strong commitment to new music, the Festival d'Aix-en-Provence has a distinguished history of presenting repertoire across the centuries, from Monteverdi and Mozart to the dramatic operas of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century. Patrice Chéreau's 2013 staging of Richard Strauss' ***Elektra*** is another example of a production nurtured and premiered in Aix, which continues to be celebrated and staged around the world, including at the New York Metropolitan Opera, a house closely and famously associated with Birgit Nilsson.

"It was here in Stockholm that Birgit Nilsson gave her very first performance as *Elektra* in 1965 at the Royal Swedish Opera" said Susanne Rydén. "Sixty years later her legacy continues to thrive, giving important recognition and support to the talents of both today and tomorrow. As we prepare to celebrate the achievements of the Festival d'Aix-en-Provence at this year's Prize Ceremony, we also give thanks to Pierre Audi for his extraordinary contribution to the world of opera."

The 2025 Birgit Nilsson Prize Ceremony on October 21 will be a musical celebration in honour of the Festival d'Aix-en-Provence, accompanied by the Royal Stockholm Philharmonic Orchestra and Royal Swedish Opera Chorus under the direction of Susanna Mälkki. Tickets go on sale on May 22 and audiences around the world can watch live on [Konserthuset Play](https://www.konserthusetplay.se).