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Opera Now

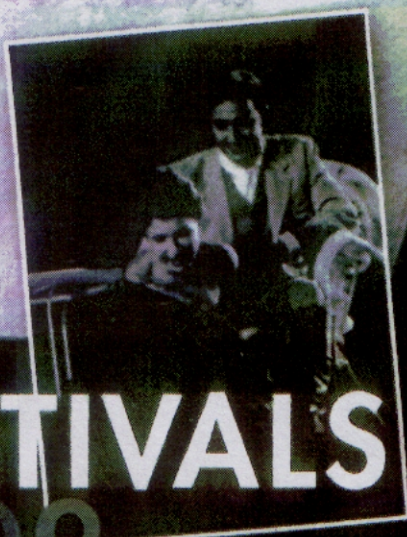
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OPERA'S GREATEST
HEADACHE

CASTING WAGNER

Nina Stemme provides
the cure in Covent Garden's
Tristan und Isolde

LADIES IN THE LEAD
Soile Isokoski &
Sondra Radvanovsky



FESTIVALS 2009

SPECIAL REPORT

OPERA IN CHILE

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LEFT: *Lulu* with *Jack the Ripper*
 ABOVE AND LEFT BELOW: *Moses und Aron*

operas of the 20th century, somewhere between Mahlerian chromaticism and total atonality, *Wozzeck* is a challenge. If the Miskolc company found the work taxing and the orchestra could perhaps have done with more rehearsal, they somehow pulled it off to present an unsettling nightmare vision that perfectly matched Berg's grim musical canvas, leaving the audience drained. Teruhiko Komori gave a strong account of the title role, full of pathos, matched by Franziska Rauch as an overtly sexual Marie. Jürgen Miller's powerfully sung Drum Major was a nasty virile bully, making Marie's fascination all the more believable.

Schoenberg's incomplete opera *Moses und Aron* contains some of his most demanding and visceral serial music. The vocal writing of the principal roles require two singers utterly secure and who can bring *gravitas* and authority throughout. Fortunately, Wolfgang Schöne was ideal as Moses, ably matched by Daniel Brenna as Aron.

The intensely convoluted serial lines that dominate the orchestration, set against some of the most difficult choral writing of its time, makes this a challenge for conductors, but Zoltán Kocsis directed a tightly controlled and tense performance from the very fine National Philharmonic Orchestra and Choir.

Because of time and budget constraints, the opera was only semi-staged by Giorgio Pressburger, and set entirely in a synagogue (perhaps appropriate, given the subtext of Schoenberg's

own conflict about his 'Jewishness' around the time he completed the work in 1933), with the two protagonists dressed as Rabbis and the chorus being arranged in the pews. Somewhat static, it made the work seem longer than it is. The exception to this was the infamous Orgy at the Golden Calf scene, where suddenly, a large golden idol was brought in and four completely naked 'virgins' disported themselves and then enthusiastically simulated sexual intercourse with some shirtless young men. For me, this intrusion of tasteless stage action was unnecessarily sensational.

A selection of earlier Viennese works by Mozart and Haydn contrasted well with the operas of the New Viennese School. Helikon Opera presented Mozart's early one-act *Apollo und Hyacinthus*, charmingly staged in a country house setting, with the five characters meeting as friends and entertaining each other. This really worked. The young singers were excellent, especially Marina Kalinina (*Hyacinthus*). It was artfully paired with Rimsky-Korsakov's *Mozart and Salieri*, well sung by Vasily Efimov (a fine Alwa in the previous night's performance of *Lulu*) and Andrey Serov respectively. Efimov even played the piano in the Inn scene, and very well too.

The Vocal Department from the University of Szeged mounted a trio of little-known 18th-century operas, with imagination and humour. The earliest of these, Gluck's *Le cadí dupé* (The

Duped Qadi) is a buffa with an Arabian theme set to undistinguished music, but was amusingly done.

Haydn's *La Canterina* (The Diva) fared better, full of that infectious gaiety so typical of the composer. There was a fine comic performance by the young tenor Gyula Rab, a genuine *tenore di grazia*, who made such an impression on me in *Sadko* at last year's festival. He has a beautifully placed voice, and is a good actor, scoring well as the eponymous Diva's teacher who is also in love with her, thereby causing complications. In spite of no English surtitles, it all made sense and moreover made me laugh, and this was entirely due to the acting and direction.

Finally, Mozart's rarely performed and sadly unfinished *L'Oca del Cairo* (The Cairo Goose) dating from 1784, which has some really fine music and partly looks ahead to *Figaro* composed two years later. Had he finished this, it would have been his first genuine Italian opera buffa but a disagreement with the librettist made him abandon it with just 45 minutes of music written.

Here, young tenor Szilveszter Szélpál was the star, exceptionally good and funny in the role of Biondello. The foolish story concerns a Spanish Marquess, Don Pippo, who keeps his only daughter Celidora locked up in a tower. She is betrothed to a Count, but her true love is Biondello, who makes a bet that if he can rescue Celidora within a year, he wins her hand in marriage. He succeeds by having himself smuggled into the tower garden inside a large mechanical *goose! Rebeka Bobanj was an engaging Celidora, the costumes simple and colourful and the silly stage business deftly managed.

The closing gala presented extended excerpts from operas by Mozart and Richard Strauss, including a potted version of *Der Rosenkavalier*, with a finely sung Trio featuring Ingrid Kaiserfeld, Ildikó Komlósi and Rita Rác. Rác is at the very start of her career, and is a remarkable talent. She opened the second half with a stunning account of Zerbinetta's testing aria from *Ariadne auf Naxos*. Miklós Sebestyén (a fine bass-baritone), sang Ochs's monologue with great wit. He has a wonderfully rich instrument and told me later he had never sung the role. One would never have guessed. Carlo Montanaro conducted with style. In all, this annual festival was an *embarras de richesse*, as usual, well worth a visit.

Details of the 2010 Miskolc programme will be posted on the website in January
www.operafesztival.hu