

## China

### Shanghai

Guo Wenjing is the leading Chinese opera composer of his generation still based in his native country, and perhaps anywhere in the world. His new chamber opera, *Poet Li Bai*, is set to a unique libretto, though its treatment is not unfamiliar in Chinese literature. The famous Tang poet engages in dramatic conversation with inanimate objects drawn from his life and work: wine, imperial officials, and the moon. The librettists Diana Liao and Xu Ying include subtle, but only fragmentary allusions to Li Bai's most famous poems, which educated Chinese know by heart. It all sounds very Chinese, but the basic theme is universal, namely the internal struggle to overcome frivolous pleasures—like wine and imperial favour—in order to follow one's artistic muse.

Guo Wenjing's opera, premiered last summer at Colorado's Central City Opera and revived at Shanghai's GRAND THEATRE on October 15 as part of the SHANGHAI INTERNATIONAL ARTS FESTIVAL, succeeds brilliantly in capturing this complex interplay between the corporeal and the cerebral. His musical idiom might be described as 'modernism with Chinese characteristics'. Echoes of Janáček, Shostakovich and Bartók define its form and harmony, particularly in more overtly expressionistic passages, most often in the brass—this being the common pedagogical background of the mainland Chinese composers trained post-1949.

In contrast to these 20th-century masters, however, Guo Wenjing's music (here more than in his previous work) is delicate and ethereal. Much of the score's beauty lies in its understatement, the silences, the notes left out—as befits a nocturnal chamber opera about the most effortlessly elegant of Chinese poets. To achieve this mood, Guo also deploys traditional Chinese instruments and operatic techniques in a manner at once more rigorous and more nuanced than his more celebrated 1978 Beijing classmate, Tan Dun. The Shanghai Opera House orchestra created this distinctive sound-world flawlessly under the suave command of the veteran Chinese conductor Zhang Guoyang.

Guo writes with particular felicity for the human voice, and the all-Chinese cast rose to the occasion—with two singers showing particular distinction. The bass Tian Hao Jiang, well-known from the Met and elsewhere, was on stage continuously for 90 minutes in a *tour de force* performance of the title role. A singing actor at the height of his powers, he deployed a bright but warm voice to express a Shakespearian range of emotions. Of nearly equal stature

was a stunning portrayal of the mercurial character Wine by the young tenor Chi Liming, who complemented agile well-placed bel canto with stunning outbursts of verismo power. The soprano Zhou Xiaolin was appropriately pure as the Moon, and the tenor Jiang Qihu's portrayal of the Poetry/Magistrate in Peking Opera style, without vibrato, added pungency. The striking sets, shared with Central City, were as minimalist as the music: an empty black platform, with little more than a rising moon, a wine jug, or a sword to suggest mood or place. This minor masterpiece of a chamber opera deserves global circulation.

ANDREW MORAVCSIK

## Czech Republic

### Prague

*Norma* had not been seen in Prague for at least 70 years before the new production on November 1 at the NATIONAL THEATRE. Another reason for heightened interest was that the currently fashionable couturier Osmany Laffita had been entrusted with the costumes. Meeting him halfway, Bruno Berger-Gorski updated the action to 1940s occupied Paris, with the partisans hiding their weapons and documents in Norma's salon, later to be searched by a posse of Germans under Pollione. Not that Daniel Dvořák offered much elegance in his bare dirty-white box with only a piano in the same colour and a sofa, varied by projections of treetops (their boles seen through a series of openings), flames and a score that burned, as did piles of old mattresses in the second half. The only elegance was in the ladies' costumes, the partisans and soldiery being rather scruffy. Berger-Gorski's action offered no real excitement, but in compensation he pointed up the changing emotions of the three principals more than most productions I have seen.

Any performance of this opera stands or falls with the title role. Prague had imported the Russian-born American Olga Makarina. Though lacking the big guns for the more imperious moments, she presented a wounded, vulnerable woman and always remained within her beautiful instrument—a rarity among singers of Eastern European origin and, alas, increasingly so from elsewhere—and managed at the same time the necessary passionate outbursts in the second act. Despite vocal problems, Carmen Oprisanu made a credible Adalgisa, and the two ladies blended well in their duets. Valentin Prolat's vocal production is too fuzzy for this kind of music but his portrayal of Pollione's vacillations was able enough. Miroslav Podskalský's Oroveso was a mere cypher. However, the real minus was Oliver Dohnányi's unidiomatic conducting. Apart from some extremely slow tempos, he made nothing of the deceptively simple accompanying figures instead of shaping them to create the atmosphere for the subsequent cantilenas. Less than perfect orchestral playing but some excellent singing from the chorus should also be mentioned.

CHRISTOPHER NORTON-WELSH

## Germany

### Augsburg

As in Wexford (in 2003), so in Augsburg: *Schwanda the Bagpiper* again piped audiences into utter delight, when it opened the 2007-8 season under the newly installed Intendant, Juliane Vötterle (October 1). Previously the chief dramaturge in Klaus Zehlelein's

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