

# OPERA TODAY

OPERA NEWS, COMMENTARY, AND REVIEWS FROM AROUND THE WORLD

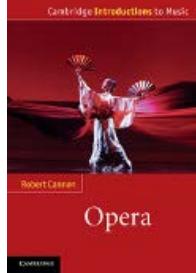
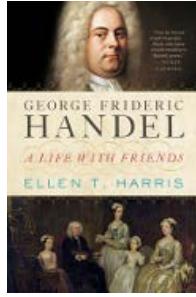
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## ★ RECENTLY IN PERFORMANCES

### Die Eroberung von Mexico in Salzburg

That's *The Conquest of Mexico*, an historical music drama composed in 1991 by German composer Wolfgang Rihm (b. 1952). But wait. Wolfgang Rihm construed a few sentences of Artaud's *La Conquête du Mexique* (1932) mixed up with bits of Aztec chant and bits of poem(s) by Mexico's Octavio Paz (d. 1998) to make a libretto.

### Scottish Sensation at Glimmerglass

Glimmerglass is celebrating its 40th Festival season with a stylish new production of Verdi's *Macbeth*.

### Norma in Salzburg

This Salzburg *Norma* is not new news. This superb production was first seen at the Salzburg Festival's springtime Whitsun Festival in 2013 with this same cast. It will now travel to a few major European cities.

### The power of music: a young cast in a semi-stage account of Monteverdi's first opera

John Eliot Gardiner conducted a much anticipated performance of Monteverdi's first opera *L'Orfeo* at the BBC Proms on 4 August 2015, with his own Monteverdi Choir and English Baroque Soloists.

### Cold Mountain Wows Audience at Santa Fe World Premiere

On August 1, 2015, Santa Fe Opera presented the world premiere of *Cold Mountain*, a brand new opera composed by Pulitzer Prize and Grammy winner Jennifer Higdon.

### Manon Lescaut, Munich

Puccini's *Manon Lescaut* at the Bayerische Staatsoper, Munich. Some will scream in rage but in its austerity it reaches to the heart of the opera.

### Proms Saturday Matinée 1

It might seem churlish to complain about the BBC Proms coverage of Pierre Boulez's 90<sup>th</sup> anniversary. After all, there are a few performances dotted around — although some seem rather oddly programmed, as if embarrassed at the presence of new or newish music. (That could certainly not be claimed in the present case.)

### The Maid of Pskov (Pskovityanka), St. Petersburg

I recently spent four days in St. Petersburg, timed to coincide with the annual Stars of the White Nights Festival. Yet the most memorable singing I heard was neither at the Mariinsky Theater nor any other performance hall. It was in the small, nearly empty church built for the last Tsar, Nicholas II, at Tsarskoye Selo.

### Prom 11 – Grange Park Opera: *Fiddler on the Roof*

As I walked up Exhibition Road on my way to the Royal Albert Hall, I passed a busking tuba player whose fairground ditties were enlivened by bursts of flame which shot skyward from the bell of his instrument, to the amusement and bemusement of a rapidly gathering pavement audience.

### Saul, Glyndebourne

A brilliant theatrical event, bringing Handel's theatre of the mind to life on stage

### Roberta Invernizzi, Wigmore Hall

'Here, thanks be to God, my opera is praised to the skies and there is nothing in it which does not

## ★ PERFORMANCES



15 Jun 2015

## Princeton Festival: *Le Nozze di Figaro*

The Princeton Festival has established a reputation for high-quality summer opera. In recent years it has presented works by Handel, Britten, Rachmaninoff, Stravinsky, Wagner and Gershwin at Matthews Theater on Princeton University campus: a 1100-seat hall with good sight-lines though a somewhat dry and uneven acoustic.

This summer the festival is offering an enjoyable and compelling production of Mozart's *Le Nozze di Figaro*, which demonstrates not just the enduring beauty of this evergreen opera, but the high quality of young singers available to sing it today.

The cast was headed by three unusually large-voiced Mozartians. Jonathan Lasch, a burly bass-baritone who has trained in numerous young singers' programs, sang a lusty, heavy-weight Figaro. His best moments came in Act IV, when he relaxed and accessed a wider palette of vocal colors. Sean Anderson brought similar force to the role of Count Almaviva, making much of his angry Act III aria. Elsewhere he might have profited from a bit more aristocratic restraint.

*Princeton Festival: Le Nozze di Figaro*

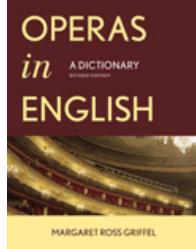
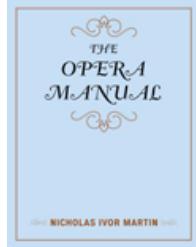
A review by Andrew Moravcsik

Above: Jonathan Lasch as Figaro

Photos courtesy of Jessi Franko

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please greatly.' So wrote Antonio Vivaldi to Marchese Guido Bentivoglio d'Aragona in Ferrara in 1737.

#### **Montemezzi: *L'amore dei tre Re***

Asphyxiations, atrophy by poison, assassination: in Italo Montemezzi's *L'amore dei tre Re* (The Love of the Three Kings, 1913) foul deed follows foul deed until the corpses are piled high.

#### **Prom 4: Andris Nelsons**

The precision of attack in the opening to Beethoven's *Creatures of Prometheus* Overture signalled thoroughgoing excellence in the contribution of the CBSO to this concert.

#### **BBC Proms: The Cardinall's Musick**

When he was skilfully negotiating the not inconsiderable complexities, upheavals and strife of musical and religious life at the English royal court during the Reformation, Thomas Tallis (c.1505-85) could hardly have imagined that more than 450 years later people would be queuing round the block for the opportunity to spend their lunch-hour listening to the music that he composed in service of his God and his monarch.

#### **Oberon, Persephone and Iołanta at the Aix Festival**

Two of the important late twentieth century stage directors, Robert Carsen and Peter Sellars, returned to the Aix Festival this summer. Carsen's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is a masterpiece, Sellars' strange Tchaikovsky/Stravinsky double bill is simply bizarre.

#### **Betrothal and Betrayal : JPYA at the ROH**

The annual celebration of young talent at the Royal Opera House is a magnificent showcase, and it was good to see such a healthy audience turnout.

#### **Jenůfa Packs a Wallop at DMMO**

There are few operas that can rival the visceral impact of a well-staged *Jenůfa* and Des Moines Metro Opera has emphatically delivered the goods.

#### **Des Moines Fanciulla a Minnie-Triumph**

*The Girl of the Golden West* (*La Fanciulla del West*) often gets eclipsed when compared to the rest of the mature Puccini canon.

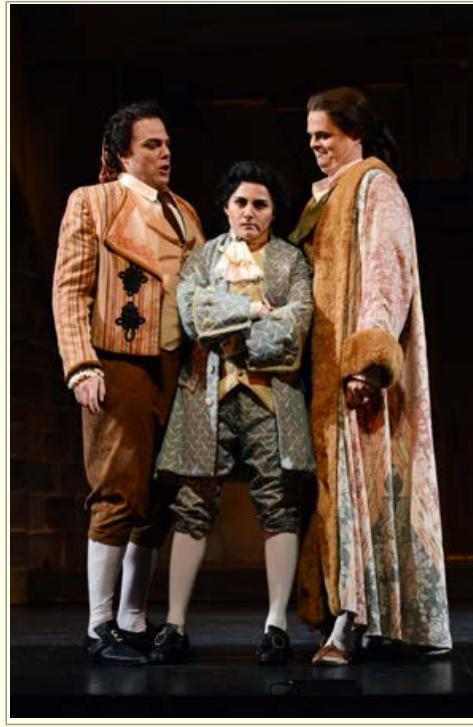
#### **First Night of the BBC Proms 2015**

First Night of the BBC Proms 2015 with Sakari Oramo in exuberant form, pulling off William Walton's *Belshazzar's Feast* with the theatrical flair it deserves.

#### **Monsters and Marriage at the Aix Festival**

Plus an evening by the superb Modigliani Quartet that complimented the brief (55 minutes) *a cappella* opera for six female voices *Svadba* (2013) by Serbian composer Ana Sokolovic (b. 1968). She lives in Canada.

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#### **Jonathan Lasch as Figaro,**

**Cassandra Zoé Velasco as Cherubino, Sean Anderson as Count Almaviva**

Canadian soprano Katherine Whyte portrayed the Countess Almaviva as a deeply passionate woman. She demonstrated a keen artistic sensibility throughout, for example with lovely pianissimo phrasing in the second verse of "Dove sono." The sustained notes in her two big arias cruelly exposed a wobble in the voice, which fortunately disappeared in ensembles and swifter passages, where she was uncommonly dramatic. Overall, one wonders if Whyte is a budding *spinto* who has outgrown this role.

Another bit of slightly problematic casting is Haeran Hong, a Korean-born Juilliard-trained soprano who won the Queen Elizabeth competition in 2011, as Susanna. To be sure, hers was a polished performance from an artist who is going places. She sang precisely and tastefully: I particularly liked the delicately interpolated B-flat at the end of "Deh vieni." She looked lovely and acted sympathetically. That being said, the lighter weight and coolly metallic edge of her voice betrays a lyric coloratura or "soubrette", rather than a warmer lyric soprano for which the role of Susanna was written. For me, this type of vocal mismatch undermines both characterization and ensemble.

A worthy audience favorite was 25-year old Mexican Cassandra Zoé-Velasco, who already has a career well under way. She possesses a mezzo voice with real color and depth. She phrased with mature artistic sensibility while portraying Cherubino as an awkward adolescent.



#### **Sean Anderson as Count Almaviva, Katherine Whyte as the Countess**

The rest of the cast was solid down to the shortest role. Two veterans, American Katheryn Krasovec and Puerto Rican Ricardo Lugo, memorably assumed the roles of Marcellina and Bartolo. Both are fine singing actors, with Krasovec's Marcellina in particular making much of her character's humanity, while remaining genuinely funny. Jessica Beebe, a doctoral candidate at Indiana with a lifetime of experience as a young choral

soloist, made the most of Barbarina's half aria. David Kellett, Studio Instructor on the Princeton faculty, lacks the extra bit of edge one has come to expect in the character role of Don Bazilio and he transposed some words, but he acted and sang well in this character's insinuating asides. Paul An, a versatile young American bass, and Vincent DiPeri, a musical theater singer trained at the local Westminster Choir College, turned in creditable performances as Antonio and Don Curzio.

The greatest room for improvement of this production during the run, I believe, lies in the conducting. On the plus side, conductor Richard Tang Yuk's conception of Mozart is smooth and unfussy. Conducting one or two beats to the bar, he quickly established the elegant flow that is a hallmark of fine Mozart operatic accompaniment—yet is often absent from performance-practice renditions. The ensemble was tight, with only a few opening-night bobbles.

On the minus side, Yuk's dynamics remain rather unvaryingly and unnecessarily loud, given the small size of the pit band—a quality even more distracting in a hall ill-designed for opera. It is easy to forget that in this opera Mozart specifically marked most non-choral numbers and almost all vocal entries *piano*, with *forte* employed almost exclusively only for occasional emphasis, climaxes, and choral numbers. In the few moments when the scoring forced the orchestra down to a steady *piano* (e.g. "Voi che sapete" and "Deh vieni"), it was as if a sonic scrim had lifted and the singers could reach over the orchestra and touch the audience directly. Lower volume, combined with a warmer more yielding orchestral timbre and a bit more rubato, might also encourage the young singers to take the edge off of what was (despite slow tempi) a needlessly boisterous account and, rather, to highlight the elegant vocal colors and subtle Italian wordplay so central to this opera.



Ricardo Lugo as Bartolo, Kathryn Krasovec as Marcellina, Jonathan Lasch as Figaro, Haeran Hong as Susanna

The hyper-traditional and realistic stage design by Peter Dean Beck was so pleasing to the eye that it elicited audience applause. Stephen LaCosse's direction, while largely following time-tested formulas, included at least one original idea borrowed from *Rosenkavalier*: Marcellina, Cherubino, Susanna and the Countess (as well as Don Basilio!) each looked into a hand mirror and all saw the different things that the passage of time had wrought. A few other notions were misconceived: for example, no matter how much of an impulsive teenager he is, Cherubino would never reach up and grab the Countess's face, while, for her part, the Countess would surely take the Count's arm in public, if only to save face.

The opening night performance I attended was sold out, and the audience gave a standing ovation. This worthy production returns for Sunday matinees on June 21 and 28.

**Andrew Moravcsik**

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