

Wozzeck looked perfect, and his singing had all the beauty Berg wanted for the role, while Solveig Kringelborn gave an astonishingly no-holds-barred performance as Marie. The two protagonists elicited real sympathy for their plight. Nor was there a weakness elsewhere in the cast; Douglas Nasrawi's Captain and Jan-Hendrik Rootering's Doctor gave excellent performances as unpleasantly convincing characters, and Tom Randle was an effective Drum-Major, once again (and appropriately) showing off his still-splendid physique. In the smaller roles, Sara Fulgoni did well as a blowsy Margret, as did Kurt Gysen as a forthright First Apprentice.

JOHN MCCANN

Chile

Santiago

The TEATRO MUNICIPAL closed its 150th-anniversary season on March 5 with an event considered significant enough to be televised: the premiere of a new Chilean opera, *Viento blanco* ('White wind'). The young composer Sebastián Errázuriz succeeded in generating high dramatic tension, more with his music than with the story itself, told in a rather feeble libretto by Felipe and Rodrigo Ossandon. It is based on an actual tragedy: the death of 45 young soldiers during a tremendous mountain snowstorm in 2005.

Under José Luis Domínguez, the Orquesta Filarmónica de Chile brought clarity to the score, dealing carefully with its many details. Vocally, the most impressive music is that for the chorus, and the theatre's forces and Crecer Cantando were stunning, especially in the first act's Farewell chorus. Of the large cast, Homero Pérez-Miranda (Sergeant), Carmen Luisa Letelier (First Recruit's Mother), Pedro Espinoza (Mayor), Pablo Oyanedel (Commander) and Daniela Ezquerro (First Recruit's Lover) all stood out. Rodrigo Claro designed the sets and costumes and also directed the production, achieving notable precision in the ensemble scenes. Undoubtedly a great addition to the Chilean repertory.

ORLANDO ALVAREZ HERNÁNDEZ

China

Shanghai

This *Otello* was prominently billed as 'all-Chinese' – forget foreign stars singing into mikes at the Forbidden City. This summer the production will travel to the Savonlinna and Dalhalla festivals, the first Chinese production of an original language Western opera ever to tour the West. In doing this, SHANGHAI OPERA seeks to prove a point. In 1978, at the end of the Cultural Revolution, China's operatic world started rebuilding from zero, and it continues to labour under financial, infrastructural and cultural constraints unimaginable in the West. (The first public performance in Italian came just 13 years ago.) By mounting and exporting Verdi's masterpiece, Shanghai is staking China's claim to have joined the global operatic mainstream. To an impressive extent, this production shows that it has. [See also our report from Beijing on pp. 655-9 – Ed.]

The conductor Guoyong Zhang is the artistic force behind the company. He displayed a firm grasp of *Otello*'s rhythmic nuances and difficult transitions, limited only by an occasional need to accommodate uneven forces (February 1 and 2). Orchestra and chorus responded with precision and verve, if not always a late-Verdian resonance. The small pit excluded a half-dozen instruments—among them, regrettably, the organ.

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FINANCIAL TIMES

Listeners thus were given a rare opportunity to assuage their academic curiosity about just how Verdi's opening storm sounds without the celebrated three-note pedal. Answer: it thins out to Rossinian proportions, undermining Otello's 'Esultate!' and, ultimately, the arc of Act 1. Verdi, it seems, was correct (in the Ricordi *Disposizione*) to call the notes 'absolutely essential' and to specify alternatives for theatres without an organ.

In China, seniority often dictates musical careers, but Shanghai gives younger singers an equal shot. Here the better-established first cast was trumped by a younger, better-trained, more vocally appropriate second one. Xiaoying Xu, a Shanghai Conservatory graduate still in her mid 20s, radiated Desdemona's innocence. Her pure but penetrating tone, perfect intonation and affecting phrasing were offset only by a young singer's timidity in extending note values in the Act 4 *scena*. Tao Weilong, who has sung dramatic roles in Pforzheim, Dorset and Athens, possesses the stage presence, explosive power and bronze timbre of a genuine small-theatre Otello. His characterization was emotionally compelling, but for a tendency to let José Cura-style histrionics obscure the vocal line in big moments. The veteran Xiaoyong Yang, a real singing actor, seemed to inhabit Iago's personality, albeit in the service of the 'Mephistophelian' characterization Verdi abhorred. He is a polished Verdian, even if his modest, soft-grained baritone is better suited to insinuation ('Era la notte') than declamation ('Credo'). Yao Zheng, drawn from the chorus, deserves special mention for his elegant Cassio. In the first cast, Song Wei lacked the vocal heft for Otello's tempestuous moments, and rushed through some of them, though elsewhere he sang sensitively. He was outgunned by the heavy-voiced Desdemona of Mei Ma.

The staging was a lively jumble, as if Shakespeare's Venetians had been airlifted onto the set of *Pirates of the Caribbean*. Realistic Spanish galleons swayed beside garish red columns set against a blue mannerist sky. Sober Renaissance figures wandered among 18th-century sailors in three-cornered hats. The scenic chaos overwhelmed efforts by the stage director Maurizio di Mattia (the only foreign participant) to choreograph graceful Botticellian tableaux.

Shanghai's *Otello* is the equal of some small-city performances in Germany, Britain or Italy. It is worthy (with its younger cast, surely) of the festival venues to which it is headed. Judging by this remarkable achievement, opera in China has indeed come of age.

ANDREW MORAVCSIK

Croatia

Zagreb

CROATIAN NATIONAL OPERA is a company in the Austro-Hungarian tradition, housed in a grandly-sited, 19th-century, yellow-ochre-painted building with a surprisingly intimate 800-seater, four-tiered auditorium. The value of such an outfit was demonstrated by its new production of Puccini's *Trittico* (March 7). These cleverly contrasted one-acters, with their long cast lists, benefit from the natural interplay that thrives within an old-fashioned ensemble. Yet the company's opera director, Branko Mihanovic, is well aware of changing times and is eager to stimulate his company with selected guests and new ideas.

Arnaud Bernard studied as a musician and learned his theatrical craft under Nicolas Joel in Toulouse, working at Covent Garden as an assistant on *Roméo et Juliette* in 1994. Now he directs his own shows, with a busy itinerary in France and Italy and with commissions from the Bolshoy, Beijing and Paris. His designer Emmanuelle Favre set

the panels of the triptych in recognizably different locations, but all were updated to the relatively recent past and each was acted with an energy bordering on violence. The orchestra under Ivo Lipanović surged with passion too, but words remained clear, a tribute to the robustness of the voices.

In *Il tabarro*, Siniša Hapač's Michele was angry rather than morose and still a sexual threat. Giorgetta and Luigi were guests. The Azerbaijani soprano Natalia Dercho, remembered as Opera North's Manon Lescaut, is a passionate performer whose voice can become squally under pressure. The American Marc Heller's youthful tenor tends towards thickness. Yet together they sparked a powerful relationship, tense with frustration at their wasted lives but surprisingly tender in their shared nostalgia for suburban Paris. Ivanka Boljkovac's Frugola was a fruity vignette such as only a seasoned company member can provide.

Suor Angelica was staged not in a garden but in a high, white-tiled refectory, where the nuns gossiped with a naturalness that can probably be achieved only in a predominantly Catholic country. Gabriela Georgieva from Sofia brought her healthy *spinto* to Angelica. As usual, the Zia Principessa's infirmities were rather exaggerated by the purple-and-fur-clad Zlatomira Nikolova. The revelation of the Blessed Virgin and Child was mercifully replaced by a shaft of golden light and a golden ball, which neatly chimed with the nuns' earlier vision of grace through natural light.

The corpse of Buoso Donati played an active role in the rumbustious farce of *Gianni Schicchi*, the staging's wild energy from time to time freeze-framed into comic tableaux, its cast from hell decked in primary colours. Kiril Manolov was a big presence as Schicchi, earthy rather than fine-witted. Subtlety was not on the menu, but all the roles registered as individuals and were performed with disarming gusto. Puccini's three meditations on aspects of death were revealed as a masterly sequence, with the sometimes maligned *Angelica* as the necessary central panel, the whole greater than the sum of its parts.

After a rather Germanic edited version of *Carmen* last autumn, the Zagreb audience really appreciated the honesty of this *Trittico*. It will be interesting to see the reaction to the next new production, Josip Mendić's *Mirjana*, a rediscovered Croatian opera previously staged in mid-20th-century Czechoslovakia.

NICHOLAS PAYNE

France

Paris

Fresh from his *Yevgeny Onegin* in Munich, which portrayed Lensky and Onegin as a gay couple, the Polish director Krzysztof Warlikowski has stirred up trouble again, although this time the provocation was almost peripheral to his work. Immediately prior to the start of Act 3 of the OPERA BASTILLE's new *Parsifal*, clips were shown from Roberto Rossellini's 1948 film *Germany Year Zero*, including the 12-year-old protagonist's suicide by jumping from a building. At the final dress rehearsal this provoked angry responses from some members of the audience, which in turn elicited an appearance by Gerard Mortier to remind those present to behave like guests. Since the incident was reported in the press, the first-night audience on March 4 could hardly have been expected to keep still, but what exactly was so objectionable about the clips? Another attempt to link Wagner with Nazism? A waste of time that unduly prolonged a long opera? Or were people venting hostilities festering from