

## Italy

### Florence

A 'semi-staged' production of *Un ballo in maschera* opened the season at the TEATRO COMUNALE on September 21 under the baton of Daniel Oren in a chilly and growingly hostile atmosphere, mostly due to the gloom of the minimalist *mise en scène*. Not surprisingly, after the curtain came down on the final scene with no ball or masked guests (just bowler hats for the men, red wigs and sunglasses for the ladies), clear dissent was voiced towards the director Marco Gandini and his team.

In Act 1, a black and white 'stand and deliver' performance, complete with scores and music stands, stiffened the chorus and the leads until the scene changed to Ulrica's cavern and a magic wand seemed to whip everyone into action, the fortune-teller even sporting a costume of sorts while Riccardo and Oscar were still in their concert suits. Larissa Diadkova as Ulrica displayed a deep and resounding mezzo voice but her diction remained far from clear in the whole scene.

In Act 2 the musical level of the performance rose high above the visual impact of a monochrome, dreary set. Violeta Urmana (her debut as Amelia) offered a convincing interpretation with her warmly vibrant voice and passionate intensity even though her top notes sounded rather thin. Her great duet with Ramón Vargas as Riccardo proved the most enjoyable moment in the evening since both singers interacted with genuine passion, and the orchestra provided theatrical tension and support, perhaps that was also the best moment of Oren's uneven conducting. Roberto Frontali's full and deep voice created a heartfelt Renato and his 'Eri tu' was warmly greeted by the audience. On the other hand, his acting looked awkward or rather gave the impression that he was ill at ease in such uninspiring surroundings, a feeling also induced by the interpretation of Ofelia Sala as Oscar, in spite of the elan and exuberant coloratura she lavished on her role.

To be fair to Gandini, ongoing renovation works at the Comunale hindered the proper use of the stage, so the black box setting apparently was the only option apart from a straight concert performance; still, continuous stage action and meaningful costuming might have helped such a good cast to get into more convincing characterizations and the audience to appreciate fully a neat, perceptive reading of Verdi's beautiful score without the glamour of more traditional productions.

MAFFEO SANSONE

## Japan

### Tokyo

Pity the impresario of NEW NATIONAL THEATRE, Tokyo's leading company, condemned to compete against the richest smorgasbord of touring opera anywhere in the world. NTT recently chose to launch the company's 10th anniversary season with a new production of *Tannhäuser*. Yet any experienced Japanese Wagnerian in attendance (that is, not attending Daniel Barenboim's Berlin *Tristan* across town that very night) could hardly fail to make the comparison with the celebrated Sinopoli/Bayreuth *Tannhäuser* that inaugurated the Bunkamura Theatre in 1989, the Deutsche Oper production under Thielemann a decade later, the Bayerische Staatsoper production under Mehta two years ago, or Ozawa's Opera Nomura festival performance last March. Indeed, the NTT sets were hardly struck before the Semperoper under Fabio Luisi arrived from the city of

*Tannhäuser*'s celebrated premiere with yet another interpretation.

By those standards, or even less demanding ones, NNT's account was visually tired and musically uneven (October 11). Hans-Peter Lehmann's production, with scenery and costumes by Olaf Zombach, may have been new, but it seemed like something salvaged from mid-1970s Germany. Abstract metal and glass towers slid across the stage, illuminated crudely: garish red and blue for Venusberg, warm green and yellow for the Wartburg. The bacchanal featured dancers clad in tie-dyed body-suits and platinum blonde wigs, dancing classical steps. Interpretatively, the staging had so little to say that one longed—dare one admit it?—for a bracing dash of *Regietheater*.

Musically, the performance transcended the banality of the staging, with one truly memorable assumption. Ricarda Merbeth's Elisabeth was no abstract Madonna, but a passionate flesh-and-blood woman who stands by her man—and stands down a room full of armed men to save him. Despite an occasionally intrusive vibrato, her powerful and dark soprano vividly projected the character not so much in set pieces of pure music ('Dich, teurer Halle') as electrifying instants of inner existential turmoil ('Heinrich! Heinrich! Was tatet Ihr mir an?').

Albert Bonnema, best-known as Stuttgart's *Götterdämmerung* Siegfried, replaced the ailing Wolfgang Milgramm. He wielded his boyish and bright tenor with admirable musicality, but its basic lack of Wagnerian heft led him to lunge at much of the title role's famously high tessitura, sliding off pitch and imparting an impression of desperation that served him well only in the Rome Monologue.

Linda Watson's resonant soprano keeps her a busy Brünnhilde these days, but the voice is now a bit too heavy and deeply placed for the early-Wagner love goddess. A consummate professional, she compensated well with a sexy legato and sharp word pointing in her final desperate effort to hold onto the straying knight.

The rest of the cast, save one, was unremarkable: Hans Tschammer's Hermann sounded age-appropriate; Martin Ganter's Wolfram was louder than suave, though he warmed to the part. The other knights blustered. But the rising young Japanese soprano Keiko Yoshihara picked a sonic sweet spot, dropped all pretence of characterization, and milked her moments as the Junger Hirt—enough to convince me that I'd like to hear her as a Mozartian leading lady.

The Tokyo Philharmonic under the peripatetic Frenchman Philippe Auguin gave a swift and streamlined account of Wagner's score, though without the *rubato* and bass resonance some have might preferred.

ANDREW MORAVCSIK

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