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RECENTLY IN PERFORMANCES

Emmanuel Chabrier L'Étoile — Royal Opera House London

Premiered in 1877 at Offenbach's own Théâtre des Bouffes Parisiens, Emmanuel Chabrier's *L'Étoile* has a libretto, by Eugène Leterrier and Albert Vanloo, which stirs the blackly comic, the farcical and the bizarre into a surreal melange, blending contemporary satire with the frankly outlandish.

Robert Ashley's Quicksand at the Kitchen
Robert Ashley's opera-novel *Quicksand* makes for a novel experience

Premiere of Raskatov's Green Mass
One of the leading Russian composers of his generation, Alexander Raskatov's reputation in the UK and western Europe derives from several, recent large-scale compositions, such as his reconstruction of Alfred Schnittke's Ninth Symphony from a barely legible manuscript (the work was first performed in 2007 in the Dresden Frauenkirche by the Dresden Philharmonic under Dennis Russell Davies), and his 2010 opera *A Dog's Heart*, based on Mikhail Bulgakov's satire (which was directed by Simon McBurney at English National Opera in 2010, following the opera's premiere at Netherlands Opera earlier that year).

Orpheus in the Underworld, Opera Danube
I'm not sure that St John's Smith Square was the most appropriate venue for Opera Danube's latest production: Jacques Offenbach's satirical frolic, *Orpheus in the Underworld*.

Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk in Lyon
This nasty little opera evening in Lyon lived up to the opera's initial reputation as pure pornophony. This is the erotic Shostakovich of the D minor cello sonata, it is the sarcastic and complicated Shostakovich of *The Nose* . . .

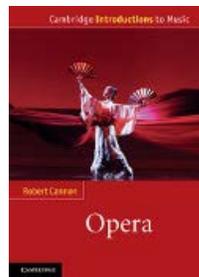
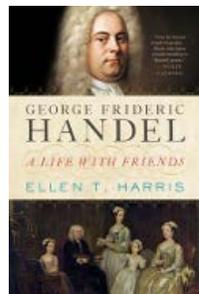
Bel Canto: A World Premiere at Lyric Opera of Chicago
During December 2015 and presently in January Lyric Opera of Chicago has featured the world premiere of the opera *Bel Canto*, with music by Jimmy López and libretto by Nilo Cruz, based on the novel by Ann Patchett.

Tosca, Royal Opera
Christmas at the Royal Opera House is all about magic, mystery and miracles: as represented by the conjuror's exploits in *The Nutcracker* — with its Kingdom of Sweets and Sugar Plum Fairy — or, as in the Linbury Theatre this year, the fantastical adventures of the Firework-Maker's Daughter, Lila, and her companions — a lovesick elephant, swashbuckling pirates, tropical beasts and Fire-Fiends.

Lianna Haroutounian resplendent in Madama Butterfly at the Concertgebouw
The title role is a deciding factor in *Madama Butterfly*. Despite a last-minute conductor cancellation, last Saturday's concert performance at the Concertgebouw was a resounding success, thanks to Lianna Haroutounian's opulent, heart-stealing Cio-Cio-San.

Classical Opera: MOZART 250 — 1766: A Retrospective
With this performance of vocal and instrumental works composed by the 10-year-old Mozart and his contemporaries during 1766, Classical Opera

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18 Jun 2015

Yardbird, Philadelphia

Opera Philadelphia is a very well-managed opera company with a great vision. Every year it presents a number of well-known “warhorse” operas, usually in the venerable Academy of Music, and some more adventurous productions, usually in a chamber opera format suited to the smaller Pearlman Theater.

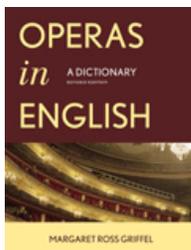
Recent years have seen memorable performances of Britten's *Rape of Lucretia* and several operas by Hans Werner Henze, as well as the company's new American Repertoire Program, which has commissioned new works on American themes, including Kevin Puts' *Silent Night*.

As part of the latter program, Opera Philadelphia has recently presented the world premiere of Daniel Schnyder's *Charlie Parker's Yardbird*. This project could not go far wrong. The idea of jazz-classical fusion is attractive to many people, and Parker is a jazz icon who remains popular and influential today. All five performances were sold out well in advance. On June 12th, the night I attended, the audience was noticeably more diverse than usual—and they rewarded the performance with a standing ovation.

This reflects not just bold repertoire, but consistently classy artistic choices. Opera Philadelphia casts excellent young singers, assures intense music preparation, and maintains solid production values. The cast of *Yardbird* was headed by three company veterans: Lawrence Brownlee, one of the world's great *bel canto* tenors, as Charlie Parker; Angela Brown, a talented *spinto* soprano, as his mother; and Tamara Mumford, a rising young mezzo, as the Baroness.

Yardbird, Philadelphia
A review by Andrew Moravcsik
Above: Lawrence Brownlee as Charlie Parker sings “My Horn”
Photos by Dominic M. Mercier

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entered the second year of their 27-year project, *MOZART 250*, which is designed to ‘contextualise the development and influences of [sic] the composer’s artistic personality’ and, more audaciously, to ‘follow the path that subsequently led to some of the greatest cornerstones of our civilisation’.

Benjamin Appl – Schubert, Wigmore Hall London
Luca Pisaroni and Wolfram Rieger were due to give the latest installment in the Wigmore Hall’s complete Schubert songs series, but both had to cancel at short notice. Fortunately, the Wigmore Hall rises to such contingencies, and gave us Benjamin Appl and Jonathan Ware. Since there’s a huge buzz about Appl, this was an opportunity to hear more of what he can do.

Ferrier Awards Winners’ Recital

The phrase ‘Sunday afternoon concert’ may suggest light, post-prandial entertainment, but soprano Gemma Lois Summerfield and her accompanist, Simon Lepper, swept away any such conceptions in this demanding programme at St. John’s Smith Square.

Pelléas et Mélisande at the Barbican

When, o when, will someone put Peter Sellars and his compendium of clichés out of our misery?

L’Arpeggiata: La dama d’Aragó, Wigmore Hall

Having recently followed some by-ways through the music of Purcell, Monteverdi and Cavalli, L’Arpeggiata turned the spotlight on traditional folk music in this characteristically vibrant and high-spirited performance at the Wigmore Hall.

Tippett : A Child of Our Time, London

Edward Gardner brought all his experience as a choral and opera conductor to bear in this stirring performance of Michael Tippett’s *A Child of Our Time* at the Barbican Hall, with a fine cast of soloists, the BBC Symphony Orchestra and BBC Symphony Chorus.

Taverner and Taverner, Fretwork, London

‘Apt for voices or viols’: eager to maximise sales among the domestic market in Elizabethan England, publishers emphasised that the music contained in collections such as Thomas Morley’s *First Book of Madrigals* to *Four Voices* of 1594 was suitable for performance by any combination of singers and players.

Fall of the House of Usher in San Francisco

It was a single title but a double bill and there was far more happening than Gordon Getty and Claude Debussy. Starting with Edgar Allen Poe.

The Merry Widow at Lyric Opera of Chicago

For its latest production of the current season Lyric Opera of Chicago is presenting Franz Lehár’s *The Merry Widow* (*Die lustige Witwe*) featuring Renée Fleming /Nicole Cabell as the widow Hanna Glawari and Thomas Hampson as Count Danilo Danilovich.

Kindred Spirits: Cecilia Bartoli and Rolando Villazón at the Concertgebouw

Mezzo-soprano Cecilia Bartoli has been a regular favourite at the Concertgebouw in Amsterdam since 1996. Her versatile concerts are always carefully constructed and delivered with irrepressible energy and artistic commitment.

Cav/Pag at Royal Opera

When Italian director Damiano Michieletto visited Covent Garden in June this year, he spiced Rossini’s *Guillaume Tell* with a graphic and, many felt, gratuitous rape scene that caused outrage and protest.



Chrystal E. Williams as Charlie’s first wife, Rebecca Parker, and Angela Brown as Charlie’s mother, Addie Parker

Each sang well in *Yardbird*. Brown’s large, warm voice easily filled the hall. Mumford provided a consistent combination of elegant focus, rich color and sensitive phrasing. And Brownlee, on stage almost all night, sang with tireless elegance and passion, particularly at the top of his voice. Two Virginians, mezzo Chrystal Williams and baritone Will Liverman, made promising company debuts as Rebecca and Dizzy Gillespie respectively. All seemed comfortable singing in the grey area between jazz and classical music. Music director Corrado Rovaris led a pit band of 15 skillfully, if a bit cautiously. The sets were simple and effective.

Still—in contrast to what most critics have concluded—one essential ingredient was missing: a great opera. Neither the words nor music of *Yardbird* matched the quality of the premise, the singers, the production and the musical preparation.

Yardbird’s greatest weakness lies in the libretto, which lacks narrative coherence and lyrical depth. The initial premise of the plot is absurd: Parker languishes in quasi-limbo for two days after his own death, trying to finish a large classical work, which he never writes. In fact this is simply a plot device to permit flashbacks, focusing on Parker’s complex relationships to women: his mother and two wives, plus his patron and hostess, Nica de Koenigswarter.

But why should we care about Parker’s relationships? As a man, Bird was charismatic but inconstant, and his personal life creates a static plotline. He made a mess of his love life, but with nothing special to recommend his various wives and children, the drama lacks weight. Episodes follow one another without clear direction. Feeble efforts to create links to civil rights—a movement with which Parker never had anything to do—only serve to highlight the central void.

This lack of content is reinforced by pop-style lyrics that range from the banal to the unintelligible. One example must suffice. Just before Parker dies (for real, this time), Nica sings:

“Bird. Bird is gone.
Gone to that place, that place, that place between darkness and night,
Brightness and light, where the stars go on a starless night.
...Boundless gravity of a star no more. No more, no more.”

I do not know what precisely this means, what deeper theme about Charlie

Verdi *Giovanna d'Arco*, Teatro alla Scala, Milan
Verdi *Giovanna d'Arco* at Teatro alla Scala, Milan, starting the new season. Primas at La Scala are a state occasion, attended by the President of Italy and other dignitaries.

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Parker it expresses, or why Nica is the appropriate character to sing it.



Will Liverman as Dizzy Gillespie, Lawrence Brownlee as Charlie Parker, and Rachel Sterrenberg as Chan Parker

The truth this libretto evades is that we remember Charlie Parker for one reason only: he revolutionized jazz. In Miles' famous (if surely apocryphal) quip: "You can tell the history of jazz in four words: Louis Armstrong, Charlie Parker." While it is difficult for an opera librettist to dramatize musical creation, it is possible, as Wagner's *Die Meistersinger*, Rimsky-Korsakov's *Mozart and Salieri*, Pfitzner's *Palestrina*, and even Frank Zappa's *Joe's Garage* demonstrate. Yet this libretto, one number excepted, makes no serious effort to do so.

So for depth and weight, we must look to *Yardbird's* musical score. The composer, Swiss-born and New York-based composer Daniel Schnyder, is a remarkably prolific and multi-talented musician. He tours as a jazz saxophonist and writes prolific so-called ("third stream") music combining jazz and classical elements. Some of his compositions, notably his concertos (above all the one for bass trombone), chamber music, and arrangements of jazz standards have become minor classics. He has also written pieces for non-Western instruments, incidental music, and at least two previous operas: *Casanova* and *The Tempest*.

With *Yardbird*, however, it is clear from the start that Schnyder is shying away from the central challenge facing any third stream composer, namely to find a way to integrate classical and jazz music, as Gershwin did 80 years ago in *Porgy and Bess*, but in a way that takes account of the subsequent evolution of jazz from swing to the modern style. Since the modern style began with Charlie Parker's be-bop, what could be a more appropriate platform on which to do this than an opera on his life? Surely Schnyder is more qualified than any other contemporary composer to take on this challenge. And precisely because this innovation is very hard to achieve—it is difficult even to imagine what it would mean—I would prefer to hear an opera that really tries to achieve it, even if it fails.

Instead, *Yardbird* follows a cautious and tired formula already employed by other post-serialist operas that seek to synthesize classical and jazz genres, such as John Harbison's *The Great Gatsby*. Let's call it a "classical-pop pastiche." Number after number repeats the same scheme: a modern quasi-atonal classical introduction morphs into to jazzy dance tune with modern harmonies (diminished chords, prominent 9^{ths} and 13^{ths}), to which characters sing. The score is sprinkled with many—sometimes quite humorous—musical references and quotations. Little snatches of "Cherokee," "Round Midnight," "Moose the Mooche" and other Parker tunes and licks,

not to mention a bit of Beethoven's *Eroica*, float through the orchestra.

The result is a clever and well-crafted score that makes for modestly entertaining listening minute by minute. A few moments, not coincidentally notably those having to do with Parker's music—Bird's soliloquy to his horn and his duet with Dizzy Gillespie—stand out as truly memorable. Yet most of the individual arias and ensembles lack dramatic shape and, not being coherently written through, fail to gather and maintain musical momentum across longer spans of time. Ultimately the score becomes repetitive and tiresome, just as similar operas by Harbison and other worthy and talented composers did.

Whatever *Yardbird's* underlying merits, Opera Philadelphia should be praised for taking risks on innovative new operas and has every reason to be proud of this interesting musical experiment.

Andrew Moravcsik

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