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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 90th 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



15 Jun 2015

Giovanni Paisiello: *Il Barbiere di Siviglia*

Written in 1783, Giovanni Paisiello's *Il Barbiere di Siviglia* reigned for three decades as one of Europe's most popular operas, before being overshadowed forever by Rossini's classic work.

Rossini was ruthless, rippling off swaths of both Paisiello's libretto and his music. This infuriated diehard Paisiello fans, whose cries of anger famously caused the 1816 premiere of Rossini's opera to flop. Yet you cannot keep a good work down for long. Rossini trumps his predecessor at every turn: his music has greater vitality, originality and wit, and his dramatic conception imbues the stock characters of Italian *commedia dell'arte* with a universal humanity that we still recognize today.

This well-known background poses a psychological problem for audiences at a rare revival of Paisiello's opera: how to avoid keeping score. A listener is constantly tempted to engage in number-by-number comparison with the more famous version, which distracts from the distinct virtues of the earlier one. After all, Paisiello's *Barbiere* was famous for a reason: it is a minor masterpiece on its own terms, with a simplicity of musical expression, directness of utterance and suave 18th century gentility all its own.

Giovanni Paisiello: *Il Barbiere di Siviglia*

A review by Andrew Moravcsik

Above: Andrew Wilkowske as Figaro and Monica Yunus as Rosina

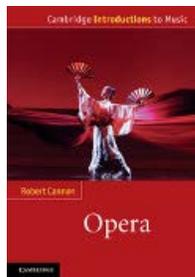
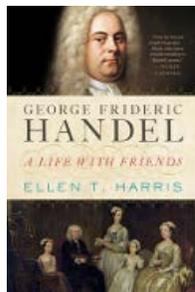
Photos by Rebecca Fay

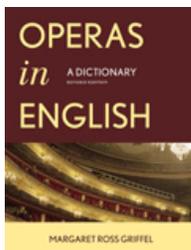
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please greatly.' So wrote Antonio Vivaldi to Marchese Guido Bentivoglio d'Aragona in Ferrara in 1737.

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 Cardinal'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 spend their lunch-hour listening to the music that he composed in service of his God and his monarch.

Oberon, Persephone and Iolanta 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.

OPERA TODAY ARCHIVES »



David Blalock as Count Almaviva

A recent production at *On Site Opera* in New York achieved the seemingly impossible. The performance I attended on June 11th was so fresh, original and immediate that, within minutes, it banished any thought of Rossini from my mind.

Much of the success was due to the magic of *in situ* performance, which is the calling card of this company. Its productions are set in appropriate "everyday" spaces throughout New York, where singers perform just a few feet from a small audience. This *Barbiere* was presented in and around the lovely Fabbri Mansion on East 95th Street, built in Italian Renaissance style. For the first scene, an audience of just 80 was seated in a small front courtyard. Figaro and Almaviva entered through a front ironwork gate, Bartolo peered out of the front door of the mansion, and Rosina sang from a second-story window. We then moved upstairs to a balconied Italianate library room that might have been in Pesaro or Seville. Throughout, there were no sets and few props, just this appropriate setting. All this seemed just right for an opera written for audiences of a few hundred gathered in small theaters, often in mansions or palaces. Though the combination of intimate surroundings, superb diction and fine acting all but dispensed with any need for supertitles, they were provided on modest HD screens.



Monica Yunus as Rosina and David Blalock as Count Almaviva

To revive a second-tier opera in an intimate setting, a company needs singing actors who are completely secure technically and credible, musically and dramatically, even with spectators just three feet away. Credit for the brilliant success of this production is thus due, above all, to the cast. Despite oppressive 90+ degree heat, they rendered this opera as fresh and immediate as it must have appeared to listeners in Paisiello's heyday. The performers, mostly in their 30s with solid national and international successes, seemed to revel in the challenge.

Andrew Wilkowske's warm and full-voiced baritone was well-suited to his charismatic and characterful portrayal of Figaro. This is a voice that sounds like it has the potential to evolve into the rarest of all things in modern opera: a great Verdi baritone. Soprano Monica Yunus made a winning Rosina. She succeeded almost entirely in warming up an essentially lyric coloratura voice to fit this more lyric role—musically and dramatically, Paisiello's Rosina is more pensive and less forward than Rossini's—aided by exceptionally lovely breath control and phrasing. As Almaviva, tenor David Blalock looked the part and sang competently, though he struggled at times to generate an appropriately light and elegant tone, for example in Lindoro's serenade (in the 18th century, the opera's most famous number). Bass Rod Nelman blustered his way through Bartolo's travails with a focused, brilliant timbre, while bass-baritone Isaiah Musik-Ayala acted and sang well in the part of his buddy Basilio, paying scrupulous attention to Paisiello's dynamics in the big aria, which are subtler than those of Rossini. Baritone Benjamin Bloomfield and Jessica Rose Futran rendered the servants' slapstick credible, with the former deploying an extraordinarily large voice and the latter a voice noticeably smaller than those around her.

The orchestra, slimmed down to eight, played under the inspired direction of Geoffrey McDonald. A few intonation issues aside, inevitable at that scale and with different environments, the players were skilled and energetic, and the musical preparation was superb. At no moment did the flow of the score threaten to fray, despite the extraordinary challenges of conducting a group of singers often facing away from the conductor.

Overall I enjoyed this evening as much as any live opera I've attended in the last decade. I was surely not alone: I looked around the room as we exited and everyone was smiling. More than that, this performance spoke to the state of opera as an art form. As larger companies like the Met, just across the park, continues to struggle with resources and relevance, smaller companies like *On Site Opera* are experimenting with performance in non-traditional spaces, generally at something closer to the scale at which these many works were historically meant to be heard. Perhaps they have found a viable route back to the future.

Andrew Moravcsik