

# OPERA TODAY

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## ★ RECENTLY IN PERFORMANCES

### **Aida at Aspen**

Most opera professionals, including the individuals who do the casting for major houses, despair of finding performers who can match historical standards of singing in operas such as *Aida*. Yet a concert performance in Aspen gives a glimmer of hope. It was led by four younger singers who may be part of the future of Verdi singing in America and the world.

### **Prom 53: Shostakovich — Orango**

One might have been forgiven for thinking that both biology *and* chronology had gone askew at the Royal Albert Hall yesterday evening.

### **Written on Skin at Lincoln Center**

Three years ago I made what may have been my single worst decision in a half century of attending opera. I wasn't paying close attention when some conference organizers in Aix-en-Provence offered me two tickets to the premiere of a new opera. I opted instead for what seemed like a sure thing: William Christie conducting some Charpentier.

### **La Púrpura de la Rosa**

Advertised in the program as the first opera written in the New World, *La Púrpura de la Rosa* (PR) was premiered in 1701 in Lima (Peru), but more than the historical feat, true or not, accounts for the piece's interest.

### **Pesaro's Rossini Festival 2015**

The 36th Rossini Opera Festival in Rossini's Pesaro! *La gazza ladra* (1817), *La gazzetta* (1816) and *L'inganno felice* (1812) — the little opera that made Rossini famous.

### **Santa Fe: Placid Princess of Judea**

Unlike the brush fire in a distant neighborhood of the John Crosby Theatre, Santa Fe Opera's *Salome* stubbornly failed to ignite.

### **Airy and Bucolic Glimmerglass Flute**

As part of a concerted effort to incorporate local color and resonance into its annual festival, Glimmerglass has re-imagined *The Magic Flute* in a transformative woodland setting.

### **Glimmerglass Conquers Cato**

Bravura singing and vibrant instrumental playing were on ample display in Glimmerglass Festival's riveting *Cato in Utica*.

### **Energetic Glimmerglass Candide**

Bernstein's *Candide* seems to have more performance versions than *Tales of Hoffmann*.

### **Die Eroberung von Mexiko 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

## ★ PERFORMANCES



28 Aug 2015

## Written on Skin at Lincoln Center

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How was I to know that the critics and audiences (not just in Aix, but on a dozen other stages since) would acclaim the new work, George Benjamin's *Written on Skin*, as the greatest opera written in the past half century?

Recently I had a chance to partially redress the error by attending the US stage premiere of the same production, with two-thirds of the same cast, at the Mostly Mozart Festival at Lincoln Center on August 13, where Benjamin is composer-in-residence. The opera is everything it is cracked up to be. It is a masterpiece that will surely be performed and appreciated a century from now.

Martin Crimp's dark libretto, fifteen scenes in an intense 90 minutes with no intermission, is a sophisticated meditation on the story of Adam and Eve. Though characters simultaneously adopt multiple temporal and narrative perspectives in a post-modern manner—individuals speak about themselves in the third person and omnipresent angels serve as both narrators and characters—the basic plot rests on the oldest and simplest of operatic plot devices: the love triangle.

In the Dark Ages, a wealthy older man, the Protector, has a younger wife, Agnès. He invites a Boy, an angel in disguise, to live with them in order to create an illuminated manuscript. The Boy's effort fascinates both man

*Written on Skin* at Lincoln Center

A review by Andrew Moravcsik

Above: Scene from *Written on Skin* [Photo courtesy of Barbara Hannigan]

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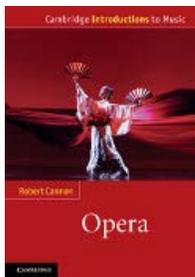
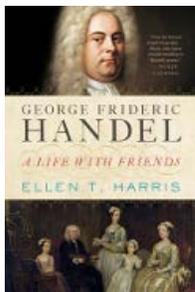
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cast. It will now travel to a few major European cities.

**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.

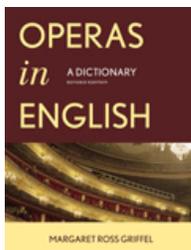
**Saul, Glyndebourne**

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

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and wife: the former because it offers religious knowledge and the latter because it offers carnal knowledge. The Protector eventually learns that the Boy is teaching Agnès to be erotically self-aware: it hardly matters whether this occurs through an actual affair, pornographic suggestion, or both; or whether the angel seduces the woman, vice versa, or both. The love triangle becomes modestly homosexual as well as heterosexual, since the Protector also appears attracted to the Boy, albeit far more ambivalently than his wife.

Eventually the Protector can no longer bear such threats to the established moral order. He kills the Boy, rips out his heart, cooks it, and—in what he believes to be the ultimate reassertion of paternal authority—orders Agnès to eat it. She obeys, but in a deeper sense defies her husband by proclaiming that she will always love the “salty and sweet” taste of the Boy's heart. Then, in a final Pyrrhic victory over her husband, she takes her own life by throwing herself from an upper balcony. These proceedings are intermittently narrated by observing angels, who also enter and exit the scene as minor characters. We do not, for example, witness Agnès's final fall. Rather, in the final bars of the opera, the Boy (restored to angelic form) narrates the vision of her floating body, surrounded by three angels, as if it were the conclusion of his illuminated manuscript.

If the basic purpose of an operatic libretto is to create moments of tension and resolution that spark dramatic excitement, provoke human sympathy and, above all, fuel musical elaboration, Crimp succeeds brilliantly. Angels and manuscripts may seem abstract, intellectual and fussy, but they are in the end just plot devices. The essential action remains visceral and concrete, focused on three sympathetically and convincingly human characters. Throughout, the text remains complex and evocative, yet extremely terse and surprisingly intelligible, even when sung by high voices.

One cannot imagine three more committed lead singers. Two of them—Barbara Hannigan as Agnès and Christopher Purves as The Protector—created their roles. Hannigan may well be the greatest singing actress on the operatic stage today, not something often said of a specialist in contemporary lyric coloratura soprano music. Yet she possesses an instrument of clear tone and, above all, uncannily perfect intonation, which she employs in an uncompromisingly rigorous, musical and passionate way. Her compelling physical presence on stage is enhanced by clear diction. She rises to the big moments, such as the stunning final portion of the second section of the opera. Overall, she offers a riveting portrayal of a woman transformed by knowledge and passion from timidity to resistance.

Christopher Purves is an equally dramatic Protector, believably gruff, clever and strong. From a musical perspective, however, I felt at times that the role was growled rather than sung, and was less technically solid than it might have been, particularly at the extremes of the vocal range. (This was true also vis-à-vis tapes of his previous performances, so perhaps indisposition played a role.) As this opera enters the canon, future baritones may approach the role differently. One can imagine a great Verdian with warmth yet steel and darkness in his voice bringing out a different side of what is latent in this tortured character.

Countertenor Tim Mead sang sweetly as the Boy. Some critics disparaged his diction, but I found him quite intelligible. Yet his voice seems to me more boyish than manly, too much of a soprano and not quite enough of an alto, and thus less compelling as the instrument of Agnès' sexual awakening. Bajun Mehta, who created this role in Aix and sang it in a number of revivals, offers much more vocal and dramatic menace, as befits the equivalent of the Snake in the Garden of Eden. The other angels were strong, particularly

Victoria Simmonds, who doubled as Marie.

This set of performance revived the production directed by Katie Mitchell, seen originally at the Aix premiere. In general, the stage action was exceptionally persuasive and enhanced core themes of the plot—in part due to excellent singing actors—while the set design sometimes tipped over into the fussy and unnecessarily self-important mannerisms of modern *Regietheater*. As is quite the rage in Europe these days, Vicki Mortimer's sets employ a "Hollywood Squares" design: the stage is divided into boxes with different scenes. Most of the action takes place in the largest rectangle to the lower right: here is the medieval world of the main plot, where Jon Clark's brilliantly subtle lighting shifts highlighted shifts in mood and perspective. (Trees trunks growing through the floor do, however, suggest further symbolic meanings.) Two boxes to the left, one above the other, are reserved for the observing angels, who are high-tech spirits with computers and Ikea office furniture. To the far right is a narrow stairwell used only by Agnès in the opera's final moments, as she climbs to her death. And to the upper right is a dark room full of trees that the main characters shun: is this the Garden of Eden, from which all the characters are irremediably estranged? One wonders whether that is the ideal place to which Agnès seeks ultimately to return, or the purgatory from which she seeks to escape.

Engaging though its libretto, singing and staging may be, *Written on Skin* will enter the operatic canon above all due to its superb orchestral score. Benjamin's writing is pleasantly free of the kitschy and monotonous devices that weigh down most contemporary opera. It is not an "easy listening" score in which intermittent atonal flourishes separate numbers derived from jazz, pop, traditional American or ethnic Chinese riffs. Nor is it a minimalist opera, in which miniscule bits of musical material are stretched to the breaking point on the rack of repetition. This is music that stands on its own: it is thickly textured and finely crafted, acknowledging yet transcending the past. Not since Britten has anyone written for operatic orchestra with such sensuous beauty, emotional impact, compositional rigor and mature self-restraint.

Gestures from 20th century modernist opera permeate *Written in Skin*. Benjamin's restrained orchestration and way with words remind one of Debussy and Britten. The technique of presenting mythology simultaneously from the perspective of a narrator and a participant recalls not only Britten's *Rape of Lucretia*, but also Stravinsky's *Oedipus Rex*. As the mind of the Protector unravels, tutti orchestral chords and whining woodwinds recall famous passages from Berg's *Wozzeck*—though Benjamin has purged all of that opera's overt Romanticism. At various points, specific harmonies and timbres evoke Bartók, Kodály, Janáček, Ligeti, Birtwistle, Stockhausen and a long French tradition ending with Benjamin's own teacher Messiaen.

Yet *Written in Skin* is no pastiche. Just as Mozart drew on Haydn, Gluck, Bach and others to forge his own distinct style, Benjamin has crafted a coherent 21<sup>st</sup> century musical language modern-day Mozartian in its spare, elegant beauty. A detailed analysis of Benjamin's use of color, rhythm and harmony is a task better left to future dissertation writers—or at least those with access to an orchestral score—but here are a few impressions. Though most of the music is understated, Benjamin achieves an exceptional range of orchestral color, deployed with utmost refinement. While he realizes of this color through the use of unusual, often neo-medieval instruments—gamba, (faux) mandolins, glass harmonica and a wide range of percussion—generally he employs conventional, but spare and wide-ranging instrumentation. The most common texture involves simple, often open string intervals punctuated by brief melodic fragments in the woodwinds and muted brass, especially trumpets. The bottom of the orchestra (notably bass clarinet and double basses with a downward extension) is exceptionally active, at times lending the music an ominous quality without overweighting it. Much of the

music seems to float in space, enveloping the singers, or is sensuous and serpentine, wrapping itself around them. One particularly effective example is the duet between the Agnès and the Boy, whose voices intertwine suggestively with orchestral lines. While Benjamin is often compared to Debussy, his music generally has more rhythmic impulse than *Pelleas*, yet without either a repetitive beat or obvious popular music reference. This highly atmospheric music effectively magnifies the shifting psychological moods of the singers, and the effect induced on a sympathetic listener can range from extreme beauty to heart-wrenching poignancy to repugnance. Occasionally the entire orchestra erupts in a jagged, harsh fortissimo, highlighted with piccolo and high flutes, but such passages rarely last. This varied orchestral texture, I find, comes through much more compellingly live than on the many video and audio versions that have circulated.

The Mahler Chamber Orchestra premiered this work at Aix. This is the second time in a month I have heard this group, and both times I have come away thinking there are no better chamber players anywhere in the world. Though atonal, Benjamin's intervals seem so perfectly judged that they benefit from the spot-on intonation and subtle timbre such expert musicians provide. New York Philharmonic conductor Alan Gilbert conductor led, tempering firm precision with gentle sympathy.

### ***Andrew Moravcsik***

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#### **Cast and production information:**

Christopher Purves, The Protector ; Barbara Hannigan, Agnès ; Tim Mead, Angel 1/The Boy; Victoria Simmonds, Angel 2/Marie ; Robert Murray, Angel 3/John ; David Alexander Parker, Laura Harling, Peter Hobday, and Sarah Northgraves, Angel Archivists.

Mahler Chamber Orchestra. Alan Gilbert, conductor. Katie Mitchell, director. Martin Crimp, text Vicki Mortimer, scenic and costume design. Jon Clark, lighting design.

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