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**Front cover**

Barrie Kosky's new production of  
'Così fan tutte' in Vienna (see  
pp. 1197-8; photo: Wiener  
Staatsoper/Michael Pöhn)

# Opera

with  
**OPERA  
NEWS**

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*Rebecca Paller*

Rafael R. Villalobos directed *Un ballo in maschera* (seen on April 28) in a staging that couldn't hide its conventional dramatic core behind some topics (trans identity, racism, the influence of the media) currently more in vogue. The Spanish director kept the American setting of Verdi's opera but placed it in the 1980s, when television began to play a decisive role in political manipulation.

Emanuele Sinisi's set consisted of a palace hall, with classical doors and a big hole in the ceiling, gloomily lit by Felipe Ramos, while Lorenzo Caprile's costumes were only approximately '80s specific. The floor showed images in some scenes from several TV monitors, not easy to see from all parts of the auditorium.

Ulrica was a TV show host and the 'orrido campo' had a tall TV antenna. In the third act Oscar was revealed as the child of Renato and Amelia, a trans girl rejected by a bigoted father. At the 'ballo' numerous cross-dressed characters appeared to have been imported directly from an old Madonna video.

Francesco Meli was an elegant Riccardo, his careful phrasing and convincing characterization a fine complement to Anna Pirozzi's opulent Amelia, her soprano even in tone from bottom to top and with a remarkable ability to soften the sound. Her arias were two of the highlights of the evening. A pity that Franco Vassallo's stentorian Renato was not in the same league, showing off his high notes without much regard for line. Agnieszka Rehlis's dusky sound was just right for Ulrica and Marina Monzó had a well-deserved success in her home town as a sparkling Oscar, her soprano fresh and agile. Toni Marsol's Silvano and the menacing couple of conspirators, Irakli Pkhaladze (Samuel) and Javier Castañeda (Tom) also deserve mention, as well as the strong chorus.

As has been the case with other conductors in the same pit, Antonino Fogliani was carried away by the sonic exuberance of the Orquestra de la Comunitat Valenciana, in a reading that jumped from hectic impulse to restrained languor, with some nice instrumental details in between.

XAVIER CESTER

## SWITZERLAND

### Sils Maria

Good news on the opera scene is rather rare these days, with numerous companies teetering on the financial brink or being told to get on their bike and move elsewhere. So it's nice to be able to report on a success story off the beaten track. OPERA ENGIADINA was founded in Graubünden—Switzerland's biggest but most sparsely populated canton—just weeks before the Covid pandemic struck. But it thrived and is now embarking on its fifth season. Graubünden has never had much of an opera tradition, let alone an opera house, but Opera Engiadina is trying to change that. It organizes all manner of operatic events across the canton: lectures, public interviews, masterclasses, panel discussions and concerts of opera excerpts with community choruses. And it puts on one touring production a year, often in Romansh translation—the local minority language spoken by some 35,000 Swiss.

This year's production is of *Gianni Schicchi* (in the version for chamber orchestra by Mathias Weigmann). It is sung in Italian, though with a local twist. The Swiss-American composer Robert Grossmann was commissioned to write an accompanying mini-opera to 'frame' the Puccini, taking his cue from Schicchi's closing plea for mercy before being



Opera Engiadina's production of 'Gianni Schicchi'

damned to Hell by Dante. The result is *Il Tribunel*, a bilingual work (German and Romansh) depicting a court hearing to decide the guilt or innocence of Schicchi, his daughter and the Donati family. The opening scene lasts some 20 minutes, at the close of which the accused in the dock decide to show the Judge exactly what happened by acting it out. They then perform Puccini's opera in its entirety, with the Judge observing from the sidelines. At the end of the

Puccini, *Il Tribunel* resumes, and the Judge ultimately instructs the audience-as-jury to declare the accused either guilty or innocent by a show of hands. The framing idea works well thanks to the witty libretto for *Il Tribunel* and the skilful stage direction, with Manfred Ferrari responsible for both. Grossmann's music draws on themes from the Puccini and is atmospheric, skilfully constructed and well scored, though it was inevitably rather overshadowed by a fine performance of the evening's main opera.

I saw the first and second performances in Sils Maria, staged in the converted indoor tennis court of the venerable HOTEL WALDHAUS (June 15 and 16). There were no sets, just chairs for the Schicchis and Donatis plus a table for the Judge. In this venue, the orchestra (members of the Kammerphilharmonie Graubünden) had to sit behind the singers, at some distance from the conductor Claudio Danuser (who is also the *spiritus rector* behind Opera Engiadina). This caused a few minor coordination problems on the opening night, though they had been solved by the second performance. As a former operatic baritone with an international career, Danuser knows how to breathe with the singers, and the overall musical and dramatic pacing was excellent.

True to the ethos of Opera Engiadina, the cast was a mixture of seasoned professionals and young singers either still studying or just finished. Schicchi was the Swiss bass-baritone Fabrice Raviola, whose vocal command was matched by his comic timing. Sara-Bigna Janett and Christoph Waltle—both Graubünden natives—were excellent as the lovers Lauretta and Rinuccio (with the latter coping effortlessly with his role's high tessitura). The rest of the cast did a sterling job, including Barbara Schroeder as Zita, Sarina Weber as La Ciesca and Martin Roth as Betto di Signa. The two youngest cast members are worthy of extra mention, both of them having come up through the ranks of the Engiadina's own opera chorus: Michael Stern as Gherardo, in his first ever solo stage role, and Flurina Danuser as Nella, whose splendid voice is paired with considerable acting chops. In the bilingual, speaking part of the Judge, Lorenzo Polin managed to convey the comedic aspects of his role even to those in the audience who had little or no command of Romansh. The second performance was preceded in the same venue by a children's concert featuring the younger cast members, assorted youthful musicians from the region and a children's choir from the nearby Italian town of Chiavenna. As

at the opera performances themselves, the auditorium was full. Perhaps opera has finally found a niche in Graubünden after all.

CHRIS WALTON

## UKRAINE

### Lviv

What links music history and the French Revolution? Some may think of the development of the guillotine: replacing a semicircular blade with a more efficient one shaped like a harpsichord plectrum was an innovation introduced by Tobias Schmidt, a harpsichord maker. In the era of mass terror this optimization was vital. Or some may point out that as a result of revolutionary events music came out of theatres, halls and salons into the streets, leading to the development of richer, louder sounds. In 1956 Francis Poulenc brought music and the Revolution together in his opera *Dialogues des Carmélites*, based on Georges Bernanos's play about the martyrs of Compiègne—a musical drama telling of human tragedy and of eternal, timeless concepts: sacrifice and faith, fear and violence, hope and salvation, and hope for salvation.

*The first Ukrainian production of 'Dialogues des Carmélites' in Lviv*

The story of the execution of 16 Carmelite nuns by French revolutionaries resonates with our present times, especially here in Ukraine. The forces of terror against the defenceless— isn't this the reality that Ukrainians face every day? Destruction of dissidents— isn't this what Russia has been inflicting upon Ukraine for years? Fear, a constant sense of danger, anxiety, horror—who in Ukraine hasn't experienced these? At the same time, the search for support, help for our neighbours, faithful service and sacrifice in the name of ideals— this is what we experience every day.

On June 16 LVIV OPERA took itself into the international arena by staging the first production in Ukraine of Poulenc's musical drama—a big step for the company, and for opera in



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