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★ RECENTLY IN PERFORMANCES

Bampton Classical Opera: A double bill of divine comedies

Bampton Classical Opera's 2016 double-bill 'touched down' at St John's Smith Square last night, following performances in The Deanery Garden at Bampton and The Orangery of Westonbirt School earlier this summer.

Mahler's Second, Concertgebouw

Daniele Gatti opened the first series of Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra's season with a slightly uneven performance of Mahler's *Resurrection Symphony*. With four planned, this staple repertoire for the RCO meant to introduce Gatti to the RCO subscribers.

Mad About San Jose's Lucia

Opera San Jose opened a commendably impassioned *Lucia di Lammermoor* that sets the company's bar very high indeed as it begins its new season.

ROH, Norma

The approach of the 2016-17 opera season has brought rising anticipation and expectation for the ROH's new production - the first at Covent Garden for almost 30 years - of Bellini's bel canto masterpiece, *Norma*.

The Changing of the Guard

Last June, Riccardo Chailly led the Leipzig Gewandhaus Orchestra in Bach's *St. Matthew's Passion* for his last concert as Principal Conductor.

Morgen und Abend at Berlin

After its world premiere at Royal Opera House in London last year, the German premiere of Georg Friedrich Haas's *Morgen und Abend* took place at the Deutsche Oper Berlin.

Der Freischütz at Unter den Linden

Rarely have I experienced such fabulous singing in such a dreadful production. With magnificent voices, Andreas Schager and Dorothea Röschmann rescued Michael Thalheimer's grotesque staging of von Weber's *Der Freischütz*. At Staatsoper Unter den Linden, Alexander Soddy led a richly detailed, transparent and brilliantly glowing Berliner Staatskapelle.

Prom 74: Verdi's Requiem

For the penultimate BBC Prom at the Royal Albert Hall on Friday 9 September 2016, Marin Alsop conducted the BBC Youth Choir and Orchestra of the Age of Enlightenment in Verdi's *Requiem* with soloists Tamara Wilson, Alisa Kolosova, Dimitri Pittas, and Morris Robinson.

British Youth Opera: English Eccentrics

"Eccentricity is not, as dull people would have us believe, a form of madness. It is often a kind of innocent pride, and the man of genius and the aristocrat are frequently regarded as eccentrics because genius and aristocrat are entirely unafraid of and uninfluenced by the opinions and vagaries of the crowd."

Prom 68: a wonderful Semiramide

When I look back on the 2016 Proms season, this Opera Rara performance of *Semiramide* - the last opera that Rossini wrote for Italy - will be, alongside Pekka Kuusisto's thrillingly free and refreshing rendition of Tchaikovsky's violin concerto

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Mad About San Jose's Lucia

Opera San Jose opened a commendably impassioned *Lucia di Lammermoor* that sets the company's bar very high indeed as it begins its new season.

Effective casting is the first key to a successful rendering of this *bel canto* masterpiece, and OSJ most assuredly did not disappoint. The fact that the four leads were drawn from the roster of Resident Artists speaks volumes to the careful selection and nurturing potential of that successful program.

First, let's focus on the mesmerizing performance of Sylvia Lee, who assumed the title role. Thanks to the success and widespread fame of several high profile exponents in the immediate past (Callas, Sutherland, Sills, Gruberova) the part has come to be regarded as somewhat an Everest in this *Fach*. Happily, Ms. Lee scales this mountain of musical and emotional challenges and makes a compelling case for Donizetti's dramatic writing.

Ms. Lee is diminutive and empathetic, sweet without being saccharine, and she commands our attention whenever she is onstage. Her silvery, limpid soprano is wedded to a solid technique that encompasses not only the pathos of the girl's dilemma, but also serves all the coloratura flights

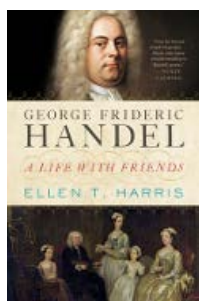
Mad About San Jose's Lucia

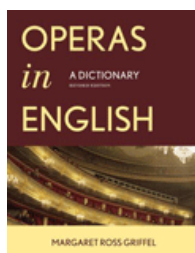
A review by James Sohre

Sylvia Lee as Lucia [Photo by Pat Kirk]

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- one of the stand-out moments.

Double Bill by Oper am Rhein

Of all the places in Germany, Oper am Rhein at Theater Duisburg staged an intriguing American double bill of rarities. An experience that was well worth the trip to this desolate ghost town, remnant of industrial West Germany.

Prom 60: Bach and Bruckner

Bruckner, Bruckner, wherever one goes; From Salzburg to London, he is with us, he is with us indeed, and will be next week too. (I shall even be given the Third Symphony another try, on my birthday: the things I do for Daniel Barenboim...) Still, at least it seems to mean that fewer unnecessary Mahler-as-showpiece performances are being foisted upon us. Moreover, in this case, it was good, indeed great Bruckner, rather than one of the interminable number of 'versions' of interminable earlier works.

Prom 57: Semyon Bychkov conducts the BBCSO

Thomas Larcher's Second Symphony (written 2015-16) here received its United Kingdom premiere, its first performance having been given by the Vienna Philharmonic and Semyon Bychkov in June this year. A commission from the Austrian National Bank for its bicentenary, it is nevertheless not a celebratory work, instead commemorating those refugees who have met their deaths in the Mediterranean Sea, 'expressing grief over those who have died and outrage at the misanthropy at home in Austria and elsewhere'.

40 minutes with Barbara Hannigan...in rehearsal

One of the initiatives for the community at the Lucerne Festival is the '40 min' series. A free concert given before the evening's main event that ranges from chamber music to orchestral rehearsals.

Prom 54 - Mozart's Last Year with the Budapest Festival Orchestra

The mysteries and myths surrounding Mozart's Requiem Mass - left unfinished at his death and completed by his pupil, Franz Xaver Süssmayr - abide, reinvigorated and prolonged by Peter Shaffer's play *Amadeus* as directed on film by Milos Forman. The origins of the work's commission and composition remain unknown but in our collective cultural and musical consciousness the Requiem has come to assume an autobiographical role: as if Mozart was composing a mass for his own presaged death.

High Voltage *Tosca* in Cologne

I saw two operas consecutively at Oper Köln. First, the utterly bewildering *Lucia di Lammermoor*; then Thilo Reinhardt's thrilling *Tosca*. His staging was pure operatic joy with some Hitchcockian provocations.

Haitink at the Lucerne Festival

Bernard Haitink's monumental Bruckner and Mahler performances with the Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra (RCO) got me hooked on classical music. His legendary performance of Bruckner's *Symphony No. 8 in C-minor*, where in the Finale loosened plaster fell from the Concertgebouw ceiling, is still recounted in Amsterdam.

BBC Prom 45 - Janáček: *The Makropulos Affair*

Karita Mattila was born to sing Emilia Marty, the diva around whom revolves Leoš Janáček's *The Makropulos Affair* (Věc Makropulos). At Prom 45,

required in passages of elation and madness alike.

Sylvia has a poised tone that especially shines when she soars above the staff and pings dramatic phrases off the back wall. Her middle and lower voices are similarly well-schooled, although a certain anonymous whiteness can creep in at levels below *mezzo forte*. Her towering *Mad Scene* was a model of beautifully calculated effects. If her overall artistry at this point is not as individualized as the divas mentioned above, this will come in good time. As it is, Sylvia Lee is giving a powerful star turn.



Colin Ramsey as Raimondo and Sylvia Lee as Lucia

It is arguably harder to locate a great Edgardo than a great Lucia, such are the daunting requirements set out for the leading man. Luckily, OSJ has a prodigiously gifted tenor in its residency: Kirk Dougherty. This versatile performer has never sounded to better advantage than as the romantically driven, politically volatile Donizettian hero. Mr. Dougherty's honeyed legato singing ravishes the ear, and his ringing dramatic declamations have a thrilling *squillo*. Moreover, he is a handsome, natural actor who is a master of economy

of gesture.

The availability of such an accomplished and indefatigable Edgardo allowed Opera San Jose to include the oft-omitted *Wolf Crag's Scene* which made a fine effect thanks to the willing partnership of the sturdy Enrico from another Resident Artist, Matthew Hanscom. Mr. Hanscom has racked up an impressive resume at OSJ and Sarasota essaying roles that are all over the map, but the standard Italian repertoire fits him like a glove.

His is a beautifully rich, rolling instrument that possesses allure and power in all registers and (almost) all volumes. I wish he would check his tendency to occasionally over sell the *forte* upper passages when Matthew seems to get over committed to the "drama" and pushes the tone sharp. Never you mind, the San Jose public gave him a hero's ovation at curtain, as much for his Enrico as for the body of solid work he has done for the company.

Bass Colin Ramsey (another R.A.!) was a revelation to me as a beautifully calibrated Raimondo. Until Mr. Ramsey, I have never been persuaded by this role or its musical characterization. But on this day, his majestic, orotund, ravishing bass and sincere acting made as good a case for this part as I imagine is possible. Arturo is usually cast with a young, aspiring tenor, lamentably felled by unfortunate circumstances. Here, casting against type, character tenor Michael Mendelsohn was a rather unsavory, older predator,

she shone all the more because she was conducted by Jiri Belohlávek and performed alongside a superb cast from the National Theatre, Prague, probably the finest and most idiomatic exponents of this repertoire.

Two Tales of Offenbach: Opera della Luna at Wilton's Music Hall

'Two outrageous operas in one crazy evening,' reads the bill. Hyperbole? Certainly not when the operas are two of Jacques Offenbach's more off-the-wall *bouffonneries* and when the company is Opera della Luna whose artistic director, Jeff Clarke, is blessed with the comic imagination and theatrical nous to turn even the most vacuous trivia into a sharp and sassy riotous romp.

Britten Untamed! Glyndebourne: A Midsummer Night's Dream

This performance of Britten's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* at Glyndebourne was so good that it was the highlight of the whole season, making the term 'revival' utterly irrelevant. Jakub Hruša is always stimulating, but on this occasion, his conducting was so inspired that I found myself closing my eyes in order to concentrate on what he revealed in Britten's quirky but brilliant score. Eyes closed in this famous production by Peter Hall, first seen in 1981?

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his reedy delivery adding an unctuous element and a fresh dynamic to the arranged marriage.

Yungbae Yang was a good dramatic presence as Normanno, and his evenly produced lyric tenor contributed gleaming vocalism. Anna Yelizarova was deluxe casting as Alisa, her rich mezzo not only characterful in her solo lines, but also radiant in the famous *Sextet*.

Ming Luke conducted a responsive orchestra with a fine sense of style and excellent forward direction. Maestro Luke seems to know that dramas need as much attention to pacing as comedy, and he showed an uncanny ability to ride the applause after set pieces to admirably propel the drama onward. While the entire band executed this vintage Donizetti with dedicated acumen, the principal flute proved a haunting character in the plot as it superbly partnered Lucia in her well-known cadenza of increasing insanity. Powerful duo, indeed! Andrew Whitfield's full-throated chorus was in fine form.



Kirk Dougherty as Edgardo and Sylvia Lee as Lucia

The attractive set design by Steven Kemp provided an atmospheric, practical environment that was visually appealing and practical. The handsome, wood-paneled great hall was dominated by an imposing staircase up left, but its best stroke was an entry stage level up center, a shadow-box sort of affair that allowed for a stunning entrance of the unhinged and bloodied Lucia fresh from the murderous bridal chamber.

The beautiful forest scene, at once featuring verdant mounds of grass and leafless

tree trunks, drew a gasp from the audience when it was revealed. Such was its austere beauty. Oddly, when this scene was altered between I-1 and I-2 to add the requisite fountain, a row of trees was left suspended halfway to the flies, trunks dangling in the air. Just as I thought "this may be a mistake," the other row of trees was yanked up to equal them! Hmmm. As one old lady audience member once hissed to another after the handkerchief scene in a Met *Otello*, "That must have been about something."

There was no confusion at all about B. Modern's superlative costumes. B's sumptuous period creations were at once earthy and sumptuous. Characters' stations were well-defined and the overall look firmly grounded us in time and place. This was a significant achievement. It did not hurt that all elements were creatively lit by Sean A. Russell. Mr. Russell manages to create brooding environments without ever relegating the performers to patches of darkness that seem to invade lesser designers' work in such moody genres. He also focuses and frames the action well, directing us just where to look at critical dramatic moments. Jessica Carter's Wig and Make-up Design was also highly effective, although from my vantage point in the front orchestra Lucia's crucial post-murder 'pale look' verged perilously

close to clown white.

Benjamin Spierman directed an imaginative, fluid production that was chockfull of fresh ideas. During the brief prelude, Edgardo appears, contemplative, troubled, considering a red flower that he carries. Eventually he places it on a grassy knoll, perhaps as a premonition of Lucia's grave. Or perhaps not. Its beautiful vaguery engages us immediately and allows us to speculate. The red flower is a visual leitmotif that carries through the entire piece.

The character relationships are tellingly developed, and meticulously detailed. Blocking is well-motivated, uses the entire playing space effectively, and explores a great variety of stage pictures. Mr. Spierman is especially adept at moving the large chorus on and off stage with expeditious efficiency. He added a chilling touch to Raimondo's annunciation of the new groom's demise by having him kneel on a prie-dieu and put his face in his hands, which then streak his cheeks with the blood seemingly picked up from the cleric's having cradled Arturo's corpse. Horrifying, but perfect use of subtext.

In tandem with his gifted soprano, Mr. Spierman found limitless nuance in the extended Mad Scene, alternatively having her stagger, pitch, swoon, threaten, sink to the floor, and recover to threaten more slashing a la *Nightmare on Elm Street*. This was riveting stuff, and almost faultless in its dramatic shape and emotional impact. Only one moment was ill-timed, when Lucia suddenly threatened Normanno with a throat-slitting which prompted his too-quick bug-eyed horror, prompting unintentional laughter. But that is a matter of fine-tuning. This was a heady dramatic realization.

At the end of the day, Opera San Jose has produced a stylish, risk-taking, skillfully sung and played rendition of a beloved warhorse that was spontaneous, thoughtful, traditional (in the best sense of that word), and immensely crowd-pleasing.

James Sohre

Cast and production details:

Edgardo: Kirk Dougherty; Normanno: Yungbae Yang; Enrico: Matthew Hanscom; Raimondo: Colin Ramsey; Lucia: Sylvia Lee; Alisa: Anna Yelizarova; Arturo: Michael Mendelsohn; Conductor: Ming Luke; Director: Benjamin Spierman; Set Design: Steven Kemp; Costume Design: B. Modern; Lighting Design: Sean A. Russell; Wig and Make-up Design: Jessica Carter; Chorus Master: Andrew Whitfield

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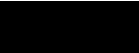
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