

OPERA TODAY

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★ RECENTLY IN PERFORMANCES

Dear Marie Stopes: a thought-provoking chamber opera

"To remove the misery of slave motherhood and the curse of unwanted children, and to secure that every baby is loved before it is born."

A revelatory *Die schöne Müllerin* from Mark Padmore and Kristian Bezuidenhout

'By the year 2006, half the performances of the piano music of Haydn, Mozart and the early Beethoven will be played on replicas of 18th-century instruments. Then I'd give it another 20 or 30 years for the invasion of period instruments to have taken over late Beethoven, Schubert, Chopin and Schumann as well. If that prediction seems far out to you, consider how improbable it seemed in 1946 that by the mid-'70s Bach on the harpsichord would have developed from exoticism to norm.'

O19: Fiery, Full-Throated *Semele*

I don't know what the rest of Operadom is doing to cast Baroque opera at the moment, for the world's most superlative Handel specialists all seem to have converged on Opera Philadelphia's stylish *Semele*.

O19: Edgy, Haunting *Denis & Katya*

Taking risks is part of what Opera Philadelphia's O19 Festival is all about, and the opening night performance emphatically gambled and won.

Roméo et Juliette in San Francisco

The star-crossed lovers were entrapped in an opera mess worlds away from the smooth elegance of Gounod's score effected by Canadian conductor Yves Abel.

Martinů's gripping *Greek Passion* from Opera North

You can literally count on the fingers of one hand the UK presentations of Martinů's final opera, *The Greek Passion*: Welsh National Opera in 1981, Royal Opera in 2000 (both under Charles Mackerras), a revival four years later, and now this new production from Opera North.

A thought-provoking ROH revival of Massenet's *Werther*

I've always wondered whether Massenet's *Werther* actually works as an opera at all. It's a fundamentally uneven work from a dramatic viewpoint which just happens to have one of the most glorious musical scores of any nineteenth-century opera. How I wish Massenet had written something like Tchaikovsky's *Manfred Symphony*; alas, what we have is a reasonably short opera that can seem unbearably long - and with a tenor role which is almost invariably miscast.

Bampton Classical Opera: *Bride & Gloom* at St John's Smith Square

Last week the Office of National Statistics published figures showing that in the UK the number of women getting married has fallen below 50%.

La traviata at the Palais Garnier

The clatter of information was overwhelmed by soaring *bel canto*, Verdi's domestic tragedy destroyed by director Simon Stone, resurrected by conductor Michele Mariotti, a *tour de force* for South African soprano Pretty Yende.

San Jose Pops the Cork With *Fledermaus*

Opera San Jose vivaciously kicked off its 2019-2020

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16 Sep 2019

San Jose Pops the Cork With *Fledermaus*

Opera San Jose vivaciously kicked off its 2019–2020 season with a heady version of Strauss' immortal *Die Fledermaus* that had all the effervescence of vintage champagne.

And like prime bubbly, the production tickled the senses and warmed the heart.

From the first downbeat, it was evident that conductor Michael Morgan achieved that rare happenstance: He elicited *echt* Viennese stylistic playing from a group of American musicians. That is not as easy as it seems. European bands usually effortlessly "live" this music, its subtleties are second nature to them. Rarely do American instrumentalists achieve this unity of nuanced purpose, that successfully suggests just the right elitist *Kaffekultur* ambience.

Maestro Morgan's sure baton expertly finds the inevitable sweep of the waltz, the building excitement of the accelerandi, the spunk in the novelty numbers, and the melancholy in the introspective stretches. From first to last, this was wonderful music making and the first rate orchestra responded brilliantly. Moreover, Morgan is highly adept at partnering his superb singers.

San Jose Pops the Cork With *Fledermaus*

A review by James Sohre

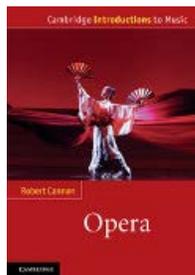
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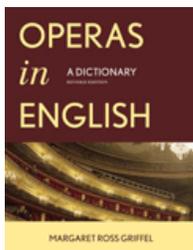
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Tempestuous *Francesca da Rimini* opens Concertgebouw Saturday matinee series
Two Russian love letters to the tragic thirteenth century noblewoman *Francesca da Rimini* inaugurated the Saturday matinee series at the Concertgebouw.

Immortal Beloved: Beethoven Festival at Wigmore Hall
So long as men can breathe or eyes can see, So long lives this, and this gives life to thee.

Stars of Lyric Opera at Millennium Park 2019
Lyric Opera of Chicago presented this year's annual concert, Stars of Lyric Opera at Millennium Park. The evening's program featured a range of selections from works to be presented in the 2019-2020 season along with arias and scenes from other notable and representative operas.

Prom 74: Uplifting Beethoven from Andrew Manze and the NDR Radiophilharmonie Hannover
Ceremony, drama and passion: this Beethoven Night by the NDR Radiophilharmonie Hannover under their Chief Conductor Andrew Manze had all three and served them up with vigour and a compelling freshness, giving Prommers at this eve-of-Last-Night concert an exciting and uplifting evening.

Prom 69: Elena Stikhina's auspicious UK debut in a dazzling Czech Philharmonic concert
Rarely can any singer have made such an unforgettable UK debut in just twelve minutes of music. That was unquestionably the case with the Russian soprano, Elena Stikhina, who in a performance of Tchaikovsky's Letter Scene from *Eugene Onegin*, sang with such compelling stage magnetism and with a voice that has everything you could possibly want.

Prom 68: Wagner Abend - Christine Goerke overwhelms as Brünnhilde
Wagner Nights at the Proms were once enormously popular, especially on the programmes of Sir Henry Wood. They have become less so, perhaps because they are simply unfashionable today, but this one given by the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra and Marc Albrecht steered clear of the 'bleeding chunk' format which was usually the norm. It was still chunky, but in an almost linear, logical way and benefited hugely from being operatic (when we got to the Wagner) rather than predominantly orchestral.

Prom 65: Danae Kontora excels in Mozart and Strauss
On the page this looked rather a 'pick-and-mix' sort of Prom from the Deutsche Kammerphilharmonie Bremen under Greek conductor Constantinos Carydis, who was making his Proms debut. In the event, it was not so much a Chinese take-away as a Michelin-starred feast for musical gourmants.

British Youth Opera: Rossini's *La Cenerentola*
Stendhal (as recorded in his *Life of Rossini*) was not a fan of Rossini's *La Cenerentola*, complaining that after the first few bars of the *Introduzione* he was already suffering from a 'faint feeling of nausea', a condition which 'never entirely dissipated, [recurring] periodically throughout the opera, and with increasing violence'.



Maria Natale is a radiant Rosalinde. Her poised soprano sports a full-bodied, gleaming sheen, with a technique that is even from top to bottom. Her stately physical elegance does not prepare us for her eventual savvy comedic sensibilities. Whether cooing sweetly, exulting passionately, or teasing playfully, Ms. Natale found every bit of variety and color that are the hallmarks of a fine Rosalinde. Her *Czardas* was the hot-blooded showpiece it needed to be, from the searing opening declamations to the limpid and colorful folksy section to the ebullient urgency of the final allegro.

Eugene Brancoveanu's animated von Eisenstein was altogether remarkable not just for vocal achievement but especially for theatrical inventiveness. Mr. Brancoveanu is possessed of a pliable, eloquent, burnished baritone that is capable of any effect from the sweetest of pleadings to the most potent of protestations.

His substantial physique makes him self-important and earth bound at first, but his total physical abandon in the duet with Falke was marked by hip bumps, leaps, and gyrations that hilariously suggested a cross between Baby Huey and Lola Falana. When he later impersonates Dr. Blind in the world's rattiest wig with a comprimario twang, he has completely won us over to thinking that his is perhaps the definitive Eisenstein currently on stage. It is certainly the most animated.



La traviata at the Arena di Verona

There is esoteric opera — 16,500 spectators at this year's Rossini Opera Festival in Pesaro, and there is pop opera — upwards of 500,000 spectators for the opera festival at the Arena di Verona, one quarter of them for an over-the-top new production of *La traviata*, designed and directed by Franco Zeffirelli.

Sir John Eliot Gardiner brings *Benvenuto Cellini* to the Proms

Berlioz' *Benvenuto Cellini* is quite rarity on UK stages. Covent Garden last performed it in 1976 and English National Opera performed it for the first time in 2014 (in Terry Gilliam's riotous production), and yet the opera never quite goes away either.

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As Dr. Falke, Brian James Myer's assured role traversal served notice once again that he is one of the finest actors and most accomplished young baritones of his generation. Mr. Myer has it all: A handsome charismatic presence, spontaneity and honesty in his acting, and a melting, rich tonal output. His *Brüderlein* was creamily delivered, an affecting highlight in an evening that was rife with riches.

Elena Galván's perky Adele threw off plenty of spunk and sparks, making her a decided audience favorite. Ms. Gavan's perfectly spun, silvery soprano caressed the ear as it effortlessly soared above the staff, below the staff, and all points in between. Her accurate coloratura provided much pleasure, and her bubbly personality and wicked sense fun proved infectious. As her sister Ida, Ellen Leslie made the most of her brief moments as she showed off her bright, pure soprano.

The scent of ham was in the air as the engaging tenor Alexander Boyer snacked on the scenery as a suitably over-the-top Alfred. Mr. Boyer's gorgeous lyric tenor gifted this role with caressed phrases, his meltingly beautiful singing only surpassed by his faux-Italian accent and shamelessly persistent romantic solicitations. Mason Gates made a good impression as the garrulous Dr. Blind, bending his substantial and honeyed lyric tenor into service of a petulant, characterful take on the argumentative lawyer.

Nathan Stark was a no-holds-barred force of nature as police chief Frank, his substantial, orotund bass-baritone ringing out with power and beauty in the house. A total performer, Mr. Stark immersed himself in a self-assured portrayal that was as winning as it was resourceful. His uninhibited carousing in Act II, and hungover reactions in Act III were among the production's great assets.



Stephanie Sanchez negotiated the pants role of Prince Orlofsky with an easy panache. Ms. Sanchez possesses a ripe, throbbing, womanly mezzo, so it is no small feat that she was able to bend it into service to suggest a bored young male character. Her/his party piece, *Chacun a son gout* was craftily vocalized, but it was when she could really let her voice roll out that we were treated to a major talent.

Jess Merlin's Frosch was deprived of the lengthy schtick that usually makes Act III ten minutes too long, but Mr. Merlin's wry, irascible performance made every moment count. Brevity seemed liberating and he scored on every beat.

While Charlie Smith's clever set design never quite distracted from the fact that his was a unit set that was effectively redressed for three locales, it was a handsome structure, with massive walls of grid work and filigree that ably suggested the period. The show curtain with news clips about the characters made for amusing reading during the overture.

The thing that really enhanced Mr. Smith's efforts was the sumptuous lighting design from Pamela Z. Gray. Ms. Gray used some well-considered isolated spots to really point up the action, and her use of gobos and area lighting were most effective. Cathleen Edwards has devised a rich and telling costume design, one that greatly helps to establish the societal stations of the participants. Christina Martin's make-up and wig design were to be wholly commended, although I wondered why Rosalinde was blonde in Acts I and III, and redheaded (a better look) in Act II.

Director Marc Jacobs has concocted a fairly straight-forward staging with the complicated plotting always completely understandable, but often punctuated with whimsical flights of fancy that enlivened the experience. The audience was engaged and enchanted the whole night. Choreographer Robyn Tribuzi contrived effective dance moves for a handful of dancers who intermingled Christopher James Ray's excellently tutored chorus, all of whom moved with commitment and precision.

Die Fledermaus has set the bar very high indeed for Opera San Jose's 2019–2020 season, and I eagerly look forward to all that is in store.

James Sohre

Johann Strauss II: *Die Fledermaus*

Gabriel Von Eisenstein; Eugene Brancoveanu; Rosalinde: Maria Natale; Adele: Elena Galván;

Ida: Ellen Leslie; Alfred: Alexander Boyer; Dr. Falke: Brian James Myer; Dr. Blind: Mason Gates; Frank: Nathan Stark; Prince Orlofsky: Stephanie Sanchez; Frosch: Jesse Merlin; Conductor: Michael Morgan; Director: Marc Jacobs; Choreographer: Robyn Tribuzi; Set Design: Charlie Smith; Costume Design: Cathleen Edwards; Lighting Design: Pamila Z. Gray; Make-up and Wig Design: Christina Martin; Chorus Master: Christopher James Ray

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