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Opera

'Idomeneo' at Covent Garden
Giordano and his 'Chénier'
Johan Engels remembered
Mozart 250 begins
Gérard Korsten





■ *Love in a cold climate: the Norwegian Opera's new 'Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk', with Svetlana Sozdateleva in the title role and Alexey Kosarev as Sergey*

certainly irreverent. Set in a fishing village in Northern Norway, Erlend Birkeland's staging centres on a gloomy prefab house which sits atop a mound of greasy rocks where the workers congregate to clean and sort the day's catch. But cod turned out to be the only real dish of the day. Apart from Katerina, all the characters carried a large fish, either proudly clasped to their bodies, or dangling limply by their sides. Boris Timofeyovitch carried two, even after death. Aksinya's first-act molestation was effected with a particularly large cod, and Katerina and Sergey consummated their passion on a mountain of greasy fish—a reference, apparently, to a cult Norwegian film. There was even an Asterix-style fish-fight.

Tandberg's aim, clearly, was to emphasize the grotesque element of the work, something he highlighted also in Shostakovich's searing brass writing by having the (mostly male) orchestra's brass section process across the stage dressed as a girls' band costumed for Norwegian national day. This obliterated any sense of intimacy. The staging was thus effective in identifying one of the key aspects of the drama, but this came at the cost of any sympathy with the characters, especially Katerina.

The musical side, though well enough executed, had a hard time rising above the bad smell spreading from the stage. Caetani worked well with the house orchestra and the singers were solid, even if few of them escaped beyond the realm of the dutiful. But Svetlana Sozdateleva, as Katerina, offered a firm and passionate lead and, despite the limitations put on her by the staging, was clearly committed to forging an emotional link with the audience. She was well supported by the powerful tenor of Alexey Kosarev as Sergey; he towered above most of the cast, making him stand out from the crowd of fishermen from the start. The other vocal highlight came from Knut Skram as the Old Convict whose Mussorgskian lament framed the fourth act; his deep, mature bass provided the evening's one moment of real beauty. The production can also be seen this month at the Deutsche Oper Berlin.

GUY DAMMANN

Taiwan

Taipei

For its annual fully-staged opera, Taiwan's NATIONAL SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA chose *Salome*, and gave it a production, at the NATIONAL THEATRE, that will long linger in the memory. In the title role, Manuela Uhl gave a searing interpretation that emphasized the character's coy, coquettish side in the opening scene, then turned to fuming fury, and finally to an uninhibited, even frightening display of insanity as she toyed with the severed head. The voice was rock-solid and seemingly tireless throughout. However, Roswitha Müller nearly stole the show with her electrifying Herodias. The voice had more edge than Uhl's, even a touch of steel, and she never missed a chance for a sneer or an imperious toss of the head. Stuart Patterson's Herod too was strongly characterized, his light but penetrating voice providing the ideal foil to Antonio Yang's rich-toned Jokanaan. Smaller roles were mostly taken by Taiwanese singers, who handled them with aplomb.

Anthony Pilavachi's staging convincingly portrayed Salome as a girl from a dysfunctional family longing for a lover, which she saw in Jokanaan. He in turn saw her as a lost soul to be saved. His direction rendered the production wholly intelligible as a visual experience. But there was one gross miscalculation: at the final moment Salome pulled out a pistol and shot Herod. Pilavachi's explanation that this was merely the fulfilment of Jokanaan's prophecy was scarcely credible.

Wei-Wen Chang's entire set design tilted at an angle of about ten degrees, reflecting the disoriented minds populating the stage. Chun-Yu Lee's lighting, with its starkly oblique angles, seemed to take its cues from the paintings of Caravaggio and Moreau, while Heng-Cheng Lin's costumes evoked the extravagant taste of the 1920s. The orchestra poured out great torrents of magnificent sound, and yet seldom have I heard such ideal balance between stage and pit. Shao-Chia Lü conducted with total commitment, ensuring exquisite transparency. Translations in English and Mandarin on side screens enhanced the experience.

ROBERT MARKOW

Thailand

Bangkok

The ambitious OPERA SIAM, whose *Fliegende Holländer* last December so impressed (see May 2014, pp. 610-11), staged the premiere of *Dan no Ura* by the company's founder and general director Somtow Sucharitkul at the THAILAND CULTURAL CENTRE (seen on August 11 and 12). The opera, the prolific Sucharitkul's most impressive to date, deals with the Japanese sea battle of 1185, which ended with the suicide of the boy Emperor with his grandmother and close circle, and marked the start of the reign of the Shoguns. It is a fascinating work, and other companies should be queuing to stage it.

Film-like and episodic in construction, the opera is a continuous two hours of rapidly changing scenes. Sucharitkul himself directed the sumptuous production, with elegant sets and impressively authentic costumes. The opera opened in darkness. Text in Japanese kanji, constantly undulating and dissolving, appeared on a scrim. Gradually, we heard the chorus chanting in Japanese the opening words of the classic 'Tale of Heike', the best-known account of the battle: 'the proud must fall, and all are but dust in the wind'. It closed, once again in darkness, with the chorus singing the same words, finally fading into nothingness with the Buddhist chant of 'Namu Amida Butsu'.