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RECENTLY IN PERFORMANCES

64th Wexford Festival Opera

Wexford Festival Opera has served up another thought-provoking and musically rewarding trio of opera rarities — neglected, forgotten or seldom performed — in 2015.

Christoph Prégardien, Schubert, Wigmore Hall London

Another highlight of the Wigmore Hall complete Schubert Song series - Christoph Prégardien and Christoph Schnackertz. The core Wigmore Hall Lieder audience were out in force. These days, though, there are young people among the regulars : a sign that appreciation of Lieder excellence is most certainly alive and well at the Wigmore Hall.

The Magic Flute in San Francisco

How did it go? Reactions of my neighbors varied. Some left at the intermission, others remarked that they thought the singing was good.

La Vestale, La Monnaie, Bruxelles

In the first half of the 19th century, Spontini's *La Vestale* was a hit. Empress Josephine sponsored its premiere, Parisians heard it hundreds of times, Berlioz raved about it and Wagner conducted it.

Shattering *Madama Butterfly* Stockholm

An intelligent updating and outstanding performance of the title role lead to a shattering climax in Puccini's Japanese opera

Theodora, Théâtre des Champs-Élysées

Handel's genius is central focus to the new staging of Handel's oratorio *Theodora* at Paris' Théâtre des Champs-Élysées.

Bostridge Sings Handel

1985 must have been a good year for founding a musical ensemble, or festival or organisation, which would have longevity.

Arizona Opera Premieres Kálmán's *Arizona Lady*

Arizona Lady is the last operetta that Hungarian Jewish composer Emmerich Kálmán (1882-1953) wrote. A student at the Budapest Academy of Music, he learned from the same teachers as Béla Bartók and Zoltán Kodály. After successfully staging an operetta in Budapest, Kálmán moved to Vienna.

The Met's First Five Productions

The only thing that is at all radical or even noteworthy about the current Metropolitan Opera season is its imbalance: five Donizetti operas to one Wagner.

Missy Mazzoli's *Song from the Uproar* at REDCAT

On October 8, 2015, Los Angeles Opera presented Missy Mazzoli and Royce Vavrek's *Song from the Uproar: The Lives and Deaths of Isabelle Eberhardt* at REDCAT, the Roy and Edna Disney Cal Arts Theater in Walt Disney Concert Hall. The opera was part of L A O's "Off Grand Program" which features chamber works in spaces smaller than the Dorothy Chandler Pavilion.

Loft Opera Presents an Evening of Excellent Ensembles, No Beer Required

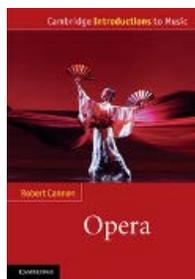
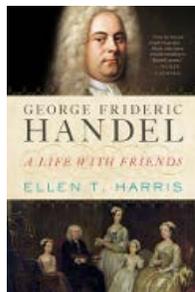
Loft Opera has been hailed as the future of opera by multiple newspapers, magazines, and blogs across the nation, and even said to be "in the process of reinventing opera for the 21st Century"

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★
PERFORMANCES



25 Oct 2015

La Vestale, La Monnaie, Bruxelles

In the first half of the 19th century, Spontini's *La Vestale* was a hit. Empress Josephine sponsored its premiere, Parisians heard it hundreds of times, Berlioz raved about it and Wagner conducted it.

It then sank into near total obscurity, reemerging solely as a vehicle for great sopranos, including Maria Callas in Luchino Visconti's legendary 1954 production at La Scala, but also Rosa Ponselle, Leyla Gencer, Montserrat Caballé, Gundula Janowitz, Rosalind Plowright and June Anderson. Revivals have also attracted Franco Corelli, Francisco Araiza, Renato Bruson, Riccardo Muti and Roger Norrington.

La Vestale, La Monnaie, Bruxelles

A review by Andrew Moravcsik

Above: Alexandra Deshorties

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Today most performances of *La Vestale* take place in French-speaking countries, with profound consequences for their style. The opera is no longer sung in Italian, but in the original French. In contrast to the thrilling dramatic voices listed above, singers today typically possess lighter voices and stylistic sensibilities shaped by the Baroque opera movement. The same goes for the weight of the orchestral sound. Historians of music often treat *Vestale* as a transitional work: mid-20th century performances bring to mind the new romanticism of Berlioz and Wagner, which it influenced, while contemporary ones recall the classical



according to James Jorden from The New York Observer.

The Tales of Hoffmann – English Touring Orchestra

Jacques Offenbach's opéra fantastique, *The Tales of Hoffmann*, is a notoriously Protean beast: the composer's death during rehearsals, four months before the premiere left the opera in an 'non-definitive' state which has since led to the acts being shuffled like cards, music being added, spoken dialogue and recitative vying for supremacy, the number of singers performing the principal roles varying, and even changes to the story itself – the latter being an amalgam of three tales by E. T. A. Hoffmann.

Bellini I puritani : gripping musical theatre

Vividly gripping drama is perhaps not phrase which you might expect to be used to refer to Bellini's I Puritani, but that was the phrase which came into my mind after seen Annilese

Strong music values in 1940's setting for Handel's opera examining madness

As part of their Madness season, presenting three very contrasting music theatre treatments of madness (Handel's Orlando, Bellini's I Puritani and Sondheim's Sweeney Todd) Welsh National Opera (WNO) presented Handel's Orlando at the Wales Millennium Centre on Saturday 3 October 2015.

Bostridge, Isserlis, Drake, Wigmore Hall

Benjamin Britten met Mstislav Rostropovich in 1960, in London, where the cellist was performing Shostakovich's First Cello Concerto. They were introduced by Shostakovich who had invited Britten to share his box at the Royal Festival Hall, for this concert given by the Leningrad Symphony Orchestra. Britten's biographer, Humphrey Carpenter reports that a few days before Britten had listened to Rostropovich on the radio and remarked that he "thought this the most extraordinary 'cello playing I'd ever heard'".

Falstaff at Forest Lawn

Sir John Falstaff appears in three plays by William Shakespeare: the two Henry IV plays and *The Merry Wives of Windsor*.

Music and Drama Interwoven in Chicago Lyric's new Le nozze di Figaro

The opening performance of the 2015-2016 season at Lyric Opera of Chicago was the premiere of a new production of Mozart's *Le nozze di Figaro* under the direction of Barbara Gaines and featuring the American debut of conductor Henrik Nánási.

La traviata, Philadelphia

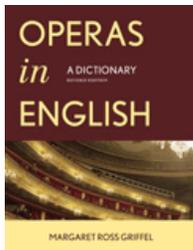
Opera Philadelphia mixes boutique performances of avant-garde opera in a small house with more traditional productions of warhorse operas performed in the Academy of Music, America's oldest working opera house.

Il Trovatore at Dutch National Opera

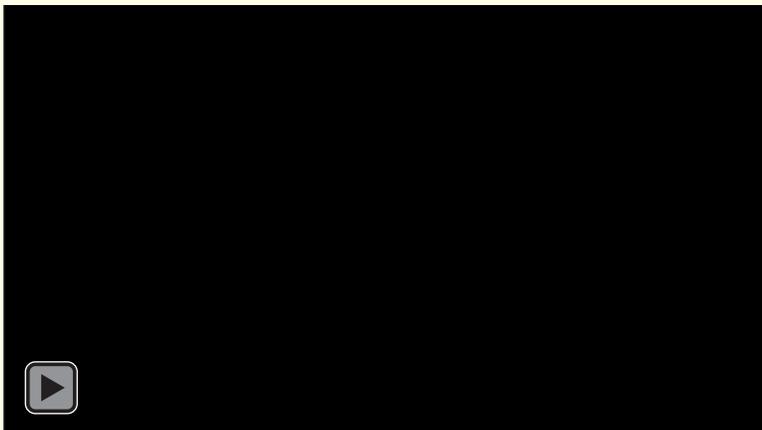
Four lonely people, bound by love and fate, with inexpressible feelings that boil over in the pressure cooker of war. Alex Ollé's conception of *Il Trovatore* for Dutch National Opera hits the bull's eye.

The Barber of Seville, ENO London

This may be the twelfth revival of Jonathan Miller's 1987 production of Rossini's *The Barber of Seville* for English National Opera, but the ready laughter from the auditorium and the fresh musical and dramatic responses from the stage suggest that it will continue to amuse audiences and serve the house well for some time to come.



tradition of *tregédie lyrique* Spontini inherited from Gluck and Cherubini. Finally, older performances (Visconti aside) tended to focus almost exclusively on orchestral drama and vocal virtuosity, whereas recent performances place more weight on the originality of the production, direction and design concepts.



La Vestale - Alexandra Deshorties from La Monnaie | De Munt on Vimeo.

This Brussels Opera La Monnaie production, co-produced with the **Théâtre des Champs-Élysées** in Paris (where a different cast was heard in 2013), illustrates this shift. It starts well. The Brussels players, sounding lively and textured under Baroque and bel canto specialist Alessandro de Marchi, make much of the overture's famous orchestral effects. As for the singers, a case can be made that lighter voices and French language bring more immediacy and elegance to sung lines than Callas and Corelli.

Still, one cannot help wondering if the voices Brussels has chosen are entirely appropriate to the historical circumstances and style of this opera. *La vestale* was celebrated in its own time for its grandeur and heroism, which appeared appropriate to Napoleon's empire. It was also written at a time when French opera still employed forceful, declamatory style, just prior to the transition to the purer and lighter Italian *bel canto* style. It is no surprise, then, that in Brussels the larger, heavier and lowest voices make the greatest impact.

The vocal star of the evening is the mezzo Sylvie Brunet-Grupposo as La Grande Vestale. This is a young singer to watch in coming years as she assumes more big roles in major houses. Her large and resonant (yet focused) voice refracts wonderful colors across a seemingly limitless "falcon" range. Compelling musical expression and clear diction bring to life Spontini's long vocal lines and the maternal instincts of the head priestess. Bass Jean Teitgen is also impressive, singing with lean and elegant power, as well as fine diction—overall combining restraint and authority in a way suited to a Sovereign Pontife. Both would be stars in any era.



La Vestale - Alexandra Deshorties from La Monnaie | De Munt on Vimeo.

Elsewhere the cast is more problematic. The casting of Licinius exemplifies changing times. In the 1950s La Scala chose Corelli, a dramatic tenor who knew how to make a sweeping heroic entry when needed—e.g at the start of Act 3. Today Monnaie favors high baritone Yann Beuron, a French Baroque and Mozart specialist for whom even recent forays into Debussy have proven a bit heavy. Beuron sings correctly, evenly, with a certain aristocratic elegance, but he often seems overpowered by a role in which Spontini's contemporaries had little difficulty recognizing the Emperor Napoleon himself. Julien Dran similarly tones down Cinna, Lucinius's tenor sidekick, to a pleasant *tenorino*, light and a bit dry.

This leaves the French-Canadian soprano Alexandra Deshorties as the fallen virgin at the center of the plot. Deshorties possesses neither the classically sculpted voice, nor the aristocratic charm one might expect. Her high notes are intermittently strident at forte, which she works around by incongruously singing high phrases pianissimo. She can thus be disappointing in roles that require pure vocal consistency: Konstanze in *Entführung*, for example. Yet she possesses a mid-weight soprano with a visceral edge, a body and face with strikingly angular and animated features, and fearless commitment to musical-dramatic expression. In the right roles, which include some early 19th century heroines, such as Medea, her vocal and dramatic qualities can ignite into a thrilling intensity that is more than the sum of its parts.

This does not quite occur here: her assumption of Julia is solid but something of a cypher. She is most effective when sustaining long and relaxed legato lines in the middle of the voice at modest volume—as in the Act 3 duet—but the role does not contain many opportunities for this. Elsewhere, however, sustained singing varied vocal ranges, expressions and dynamics, especially in the big arias, fragment Spontini's noble vocal arcs (which sometimes extend for more than a minute). Combined with a tendency to bail out to pianissimi on culminating high notes, this deflates the tension of long scenes, such as Julia's Act 2 aria, "Toi que j'implore avec affroi." On top of it all, she wears a mike, the purpose of which is unclear to me.



Sylvie Brunet-Grupposo [Photo courtesy of Hilbert Artists Management]

Then there is the matter of the production. Eric Lacascade, a French stage director, has had his ups and downs in France, and this is his first operatic effort. It shows. As is often the case these days, this production dilutes and diffuses a promising concept through mediocre and ill-considered choices.

Lacascade's basic idea is that the opera reenacts timeless rituals of purification in an amphitheater. This concept is well-suited to the ancient plot of the opera and the Gluckian rigor of the score. Often referred to as a poor-man's *Norma* with a happy ending, it tells of Julia, a vestal virgin, who sullies herself one night with Licinius, a heroic Roman soldier, and thereby neglects the eternal flame, which dies out. Condemned to die by entombment, she is reprieved when a strike of divine lightning rekindles the flame. The score is full of self-sacrificing monologues, solemn choruses, pleas to the gods, and curses by angry priests, most written in a spartan, declaratory manner.

The minimalist sets are appropriate to this concept. The stage is almost empty, without architectural elements to signal time and place. Much of the action takes place on or around a small raised platform in the center, on which are placed the eternal flame in Act II and a cage for Julia in Act III. Men and women are dressed in identical, quasi-religious costumes of black and white, or muted blue and rust. Even the soldiers blend in, though in cheap black leather sleeveless vests with matching wrist bands, they recall extras on a Hollywood B movie set. This approach makes the most of the space: with La Monnaie under renovation, the performances take place at the Cirque-Royale, a large, steeply raked circle.

If the production team had stopped there and focused on Spontini's music, which few listeners have ever heard live, the immersion in ancient solemnity might make for a moving evening. Yet numerous fussy and thoughtless details undermine any prospect of this. This is a widespread problem in the opera world, which has been overrun by inexperienced theater directors who do not really grasp the genre. Perhaps the most common error is to direct singers to move and make gestures constantly, as if they were spoken actors. This further encourages the production staff to clutter the stage with irrelevant little objects as justification for the singers' randomly wandering attention. In doing so, directors miss the obvious: operatic music itself provides movement in another dimension, usually rendering physical movement superfluous and distracting, if not entirely incoherent.

La Vestale is particularly vulnerable to such irrelevant and ill-conceived clutter, because it is comprised of urgent, long-phrased, high-minded declarations. Julia's big Act II aria, for example, has its own musical architecture: an earnest lament to the Gods followed by a desperate cabaletta of internal monologue. Yet Deshortes is obliged to get up and kneel down repeatedly, to move aimlessly across the stage, and, at the climax, to pick up and put down candles—as if to remind us at the very moment when her inner turmoil boils over that she is a novice in her first day of employment with some cleaning around the temple to get done. Similarly, the director willfully distracts the audience from Spontini's orchestral introduction to Act III, sending two priests wandering out to solemnly inspect the bare stage, direct the placement of a couple of benches, and leave. What is lost is demonstrated by an exception that proves the rule: the most sublime moment of the evening is the Act III duet, sung entirely with Julia resting her head in the Grande Vestale's lap, motionless the classic pose of daughter and mother.

These are examples of crude and thoughtless self-indulgence, but the directorial dilettantism goes further, undermining the central thrust of the opera. In the final scene, the sacred fire is relit not by divine lightning, but by a match surreptitiously tossed by a townswoman. This is inconsistent even with the director's own concept up to that point, which stresses (among other things) an undercurrent of male priests oppressing female vestal virgins. In a more rigorous realization, the vestal virgins as a group, or perhaps even the Grande Vestale herself, would have relit the flame, since for them (both libretto and common sense make clear) the conflict between religious belief and gender solidarity is acute and constitutive of a changed sense of identity.

But even more is at stake here. This cute but anachronistic touch of irony distorts the deeper central theme of this opera, which is not, as this director seems to think, that religion is a fraud designed by and for hypocrites. Rather, it is that religious and secular virtues conflict in ways that human institutions can only imperfectly resolve, and thus they must change. Richard Wagner was influenced by Spontini, and just this clash of religious and secular life the central issue throughout his stage works, most notably *Tannhäuser* and *Parsifal* but also the *Ring*. Wagner was a Feuerbachian, so surely he did not believe in divine lighting, yet his attitude toward the reenactment of beliefs and myths (e.g. divine lightning) is far less superficially dismissive than that of Lacascade. For Wagner, sacred myth is not simply oppressive hypocrisy, but an essential component of human existence; its transformation is therefore always weighty and moving, whether in a tragic or a celebratory sense.

In order to make human sense of the plot, it is thus essential that the Act 3 lightning strike be overpoweringly impressive, for it must instantly trigger in all observers, even the vestal virgins themselves, a sincere and genuine change in their perception of divine law (“Le ciel...manifeste ses volenté!”) To portray this profound shift as the result of a cheap trick is to trivialize the stakes. In the moment, it seems ridiculous that priests and everyone else should alter their entire society because someone tossed a match. It renders the plot up to that moment inconsistent, notably the fact that every character—but most notably Julia herself, in each of her big arias, but also—struggles sincerely and seriously with the role of religious belief. And it distorts the clear arc of the libretto, which traces the dissolution and reconstitution of a harmonious community. The final minutes of Spontini’s score brilliantly portray the intense outpouring of joy and relief from everyone, priests included, at the reestablishment of new collective values.

Andrew Moravcsik

Cast and production information:

Licinius: Yann Beuron; Cinna: Julien Dran; Le Souverain Pontife: Jean Teitgen; Julia: Alexandra Deshorties; La Grande Vestale: Sylvie Brunet-Grupposo. Orchestre: Orchestre symphonique et chœurs de la Monnaie. Chœur: Académie de chœur de la Monnaie. Direction musicale: Alessandro De Marchi. Mise en scène: Éric Lacascade. Décors: Emmanuel Clolus. Costumes: Marguerite Bordat. Éclairages: Philippe Berthomé. Dramaturgie: Daria Lippi. Direction des chœurs: Martino Faggiani. Direction de l'Académie de chœur: Benoît Giaux. La Monnaie, Bruxelles, 22 October 2015.

[Click here for additional information on Spontini's *La Vestale*.](#)

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