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★ RECENTLY IN PERFORMANCES

Peter Grimes in Princeton

The Princeton Festival presents one opera annually, amidst other events. Its offerings usually alternate annually between 20th century and earlier operas. This year the Festival presented Benjamin Britten's *Peter Grimes*, now a classic work, in a very effective and moving production.

Scintillating Strauss in Saint Louis

If you like your *Ariadne on Naxos* productions as playful as a box of puppies, then Opera Theatre of Saint Louis is the address for you.

Saint Louis Takes On 'The Scottish Opera'

Opera Theatre of Saint Louis took forty years before attempting Verdi's *Macbeth* but judging by the excellence of the current production, it was well worth the wait.

Anatomy Theater: A Most Unusual New Opera

On June 16, 2016, Los Angeles Opera with Beth Morrison Projects presented the world premiere of Pulitzer Prize-winning composer David Lang's *Anatomy Theater* at the Roy and Edna Disney/CalArts Theater (REDCAT).

Shalimar in St. Louis: Pagliaccio Non Son

In its compact forty-year history, the ambitious Opera Theatre of Saint Louis has just triumphantly presented its twenty-fifth world premiere with *Shalimar the Clown*.

Jenůfa, ENO

The sharp angles and oddly tilting perspectives of Charles Edwards' set for David Alden's production of *Jenůfa* at ENO suggest a community resting precariously on the security and certainty of its customs, soon to slide from this precipice into social and moral anarchy.

The "Other" Marriage of Figaro in a West Village Townhouse

Last week an audience of 50 assembled in the kitchen of a luxurious West Village townhouse for a performance of *Marriage of Figaro*.

West Wind: A new song-cycle by Sally Beamish

In a recent article in BBC Music Magazine tenor James Gilchrist reflected on the reason why early-nineteenth-century England produced no corpus of art song to match the German lieder of Schumann, Schubert and others, despite the great flowering of English Romantic poetry during this period.

Florencia en el Amazonas, NYCO

With the New York Premiere of *Florencia en el Amazonas*, the New York City Opera Steps Out of the Shadows of the Past

Idomeneo, re di Creta, Garsington

Opportunities to see *Idomeneo* are not so frequent as they might be, certainly not so frequent as they should be.

Don Carlo in San Francisco

Not merely *Don Carlo*, but the five-act *Don Carlo* in the 1886 Modena version! The welcomed esotericism of San Francisco Opera's extraordinary spring season.

Jenůfa in San Francisco

The early summer San Francisco Opera season has the feel of a classy festival. There is an introduction of Spanish director Calixto Bieito to



27 Jun 2016

Peter Grimes in Princeton

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One of the greatest wonders of this masterpiece is precise detail with which Britten sketches the numerous quirky inhabitants of the village in the score. Princeton Festival assembled a strong ensemble to realize his vision. Baritone Stephen Gaertner—who has gone on to great things since triumphing here some years back in a double bill of Rachmaninoff's *Francesca da Rimini* and Puccini's *Gianni Schicchi*—brought a combination of world-class vocal glamor and appropriately sober restraint to his portrayal of the wise old skipper Balstrode. Young mezzo Eve Gigliotti's clear diction, resonant voice, and sympathetic manner brought Auntie, the madam with a heart of gold, to life before us. Veteran mezzo Kathryn Krasovec, who sang a memorable Marcellina in last year's *Marriage of Figaro* here, vivid

Peter Grimes in Princeton

A review by Andrew Moravcsik

Above: Alex Richardson as Peter Grimes

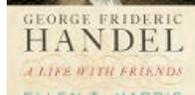
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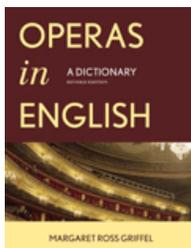
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American audiences, a five-act *Don Carlo* and two awaited, inevitable role debuts, Karita Mattila as Kostelnička and Malin Byström as Janacek's *Jenůfa*.



Musings on the "American Ring"

Now that the curtain has long fallen on the third and last performance of the *Ring* cycle at the Washington National Opera (WNO), it is safe to say that the long-anticipated production has been an unqualified success for the company, director Francesca Zambello, and conductor Philippe Auguin.

Nabucco, Covent Garden

Most of the attention during this revival of Daniele Abbado's 2013 production of *Nabucco* has been directed at Plácido Domingo's reprise of the title role, with the critical reception somewhat mixed.

The Cunning Little Vixen, Glyndebourne

Four years ago, almost to the day (13th to 12th), I saw Melly Still's production of *The Cunning Little Vixen* during its first Glyndebourne run. I found myself surprised how much more warmly I responded to it this time.

London: A 90th birthday tribute to Horowitz

This recital celebrated both the work of the Park Lane Group, which has been supporting the careers of outstanding young artists for 60 years, and the 90th birthday of Joseph Horowitz, who was born in Vienna in 1926 and emigrated to England aged 12.

Opera Las Vegas: A Blazing *Carmen* in the Desert

Headed by General Director Luana DeVol, a world-renowned dramatic soprano, Opera Las Vegas is a relatively new company that presents opera with first-rate casts at the University of Las Vegas's Judy Bayley Theater. In 2014 they presented Rossini's *The Barber of Seville* and in 2015, Puccini's *Madama Butterfly*. This year they offered a blazing rendition of Georges Bizet's *Carmen*.

La bohème, Opera Holland Park

Ever since a friend was reported as having said he would like something in return for modern-dress Shakespeare (how quaint that term seems now, as if anyone would bat an eyelid!), namely an Elizabethan-dress staging of *Look Back in Anger*, I have been curious about the possibilities of 'down-dating', as I suppose we might call it. Rarely, if ever, do we see it, though.

Holland Festival: Alban Berg's *Wozzeck*, Amsterdam

Leading a very muscular Dutch Radio Philharmonic, Principal Conductor Markus Stenz brilliantly delivered Alban Berg's *Wozzeck* with a superb Florian Boesch in the lead and a mesmerising Asmik Grigorian as Marie his wife.

Pietro Mascagni: *Iris*

There can't be that many operas that start with an extended solo for double bass. At Holland Park, the eerie, angular melody for lone bass player which opens Pietro Mascagni's *Iris* immediately unsettled the relaxed mood of the summer evening.

OPERA TODAY ARCHIVES »

caricatured the sleuthing laudanum-addicted busybody Mrs. Shepley, highlighting her absurdity rather than the remarkable variety of her sins. As the Methodist Bible-thumper Boles, Tenor Casey Finnigan projected words and music clearly and idiomatically. Bass-baritone Joseph Barron launched the evening with stentorian tones and clear diction as the lawyer Swallow. Characterful performances also came from Colorado-born tenor Logan Webber as Reverend Adams, Ohio-born baritone Sean Anderson as Ned Keene the Apothecary, and Metropolitan Opera bass Christopher Job as Hobson. Two young sopranos trained at Indiana University, Jessica Beebe and Sharon Harms, sang cheerfully while strutting their stuff as the so-called nieces.



Caroline Worra as Ellen Orford and William Guhl-Erdie as John

While *Peter Grimes* is an ensemble opera, a successful rendition must rely heavily on the vocal and theatrical charisma of its two lead characters: Ellen Orford and Grimes himself. Wisconsin-born Caroline Worra, a repeat favorite at the Princeton Festival, made for a passionate and sympathetic Orford. Her approach was as intensely expressive as any I have heard, an impression bolstered by fine diction and bright vocal timbre. In approaching the role this way, Worra is simply following trends in modern sensibilities: today we expect

middle-aged relationships such as that between Grimes and Orford to be more overtly romantic, whereas in mid-20th century (let alone early 19th century) England, such people expressed affection in a more restrained and discreet manner. Nonetheless, Worra's performance was convincing, even if she sometimes ran roughshod over Britten's intentions, for example the long delicate passages marked "ppp senza espressione" in the "Embroidery" aria.

Even more important to a successful performance is the casting of the title role. Many modern listeners treat Jon Vickers, with his heroic voice and rough-hewn histrionics, as an ideal for this part. Yet while Vickers' Grimes surely belongs among the most memorable operatic assumptions of modern times, it is unique. Britten and Peter Pears, who created the role, both favored a lighter, more lyrical and more contemplative interpretation, so as to bring out the vulnerable, spiritual, and even likeable sides of the character. Most tenors who sing the role—among them Phillip Langridge, Anthony Dean Griffey, Anthony Rolfe-Johnson and Pears himself—approach the role in this way.

Alex Richardson takes this lyrical approach as well. His voice is reasonable-

sized, although it did not penetrate the hall as well as some others on stage. His performance was thoughtful, musical and generally coherent. But for a bit of hoarseness at the top, his voice generally fits the role. Yet—at least on Thursday, when I heard him—he was the weakest link in the cast. Vocally, he lacked the sweet purity and extreme flexibility in the high tessitura that is required to negotiate much of the role. Theatrically, his assumption seems not yet to have accumulated all the inspired nuances of edgy characterization that transform a solid rendition into a distinctive stage character whose personality seems sharply etched and whose suffering opens a window into the essence of the human condition. Most of the time he just seemed too nice and well-grounded young guy, and thus slightly out of focus. Still, Richardson remains young, and we may well hear more from him in years to come as his engagement with the role deepens.



Kathryn Krasovec as Mrs. Sedley and Sean Anderson as Ned Keene

Princeton Festival Director Richard Tang Yuk did a splendid job preparing and conducting the chorus and orchestra. I have never heard either sound so good in this challenging venue. The orchestra played as if inspired, offering many exquisite moments: one among many was the lonely viola solo that began the fourth interlude, played here by Julia DiGaetani. Yuk's professional skill as a choral director was evident as well. Though the Festival Chorus is not a permanent professional ensemble, it negotiated Britten's tricky

polyphonic choruses with verve, transparency, clear diction and a timbre generally closer to proper English choral style than most of Americans achieve. Only a few spots of the greatest technical difficulty (e.g., the famously tricky "Old Joe Has Gone Fishing" in 7/4) were slightly smudged or too loud.

It was almost inevitable—given a short production run, singers and players new to the score, and the harsh acoustics of Matthews theater—that the very subtlest of Britten's musical effects would occasionally go by the wayside. Some of Britten's tripping everyday-speech syncopations disappeared. Some delicately precise woodwind and vocal harmonies (e.g. in the quartet "From the Gutter") lacked Britten's magical balance and repose. Some broader architectural spans collapsed amidst the careful negotiation of a series of individual orchestral effects, for example in the interludes. Overall, however, this remained a thoroughly convincing and coherent account of this classic score.

The stage design employed an accessorized, modular semi-realistic unit set. It told the story well and obviously economized prudently, without either asking much of, or delivering much to, the audience. Yet it had one fatal disadvantage, namely that the footsteps of anyone walking across it echoed loudly throughout the theater, spoiling many moments, particularly at the start and end of scenes. Set Designer Jonathan Dahm Robertson, though young, has designed for opera before. He should have known that this is a fundamental error, especially when designing for an opera like *Grimes*, which

combines exposed orchestral lines of extraordinary delicacy with many large choral scenes. And, having found a set of this kind in place, why did Stage Director Steven LaCosse—who has long experience directing opera, here and elsewhere—not have the good sense to keep everyone stationary at such moments? Have we really reached the era when stage designers and directors no longer bother to listen to the music?



(l-r) Stephen Gaertner, Eve Gigliotti, Sharon Harms, Jessica Beebe, Elana Bell, Jennifer Kreider

Overall, this was one of the best productions I have heard at the Princeton Festival, which goes from operatic success to operatic success. It is a shame that Thursday night's performance was only half-full, and many there seemed to be friends or associates of the performers.

Andrew Moravcsik

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