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RECENTLY IN PERFORMANCES

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.

Monteverdi: *Il ritorno d'Ulisse in patria*, Bostridge, Barbican London
The third and final instalment of the Academy of Ancient Music's survey of Monteverdi's operas at the Barbican began and ended in darkness; the red glow of the single candle was an apt visual frame for a performance which was dedicated to the memory of the late Andrew Porter, the music critic and writer whose learned, pertinent and eloquent words did so much to restore Monteverdi, Cavalli

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10 Oct 2015

La traviata, Philadelphia

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

The latter often feature rising young opera stars—as exemplified by the current run of *La traviata*. This opera has become, by far, the most widely performed of Verdi works, largely because it can be adequately performed by just three younger and lighter voices, rather than requiring four or five rarer *spinto* or dramatic singers, as do *Otello*, *Rigoletto*, *Il trovatore* and *Aida*.

The most exciting thing about this production is the debut as Violetta of Lisette Oropesa, a young Cuban-American lyric coloratura soprano from Louisiana. Oropesa rose to prominence as a member of the MET's Lindeman Young Artists program and has been acclaimed there and other major houses over the half-decade since. She has much of what a great Violetta needs, beginning with extraordinary technical command: I have never heard a live singer execute much of this role (particularly the florid parts of Act One, for example the upward scales in "Sempre libera") with such glittering precision. One does not need supertitles when she sings: she clearly knows the words she sings, and enunciates them correctly. She possesses a rich musical imagination: it is a joy to hear dynamics and inflection varied slightly so as to avoid repeating phrases the same way twice. And she has what the marketing people at opera companies these days call the "package," that is, sufficient good looks, acting ability, charisma and youthful energy on stage to sell opera to today's more diverse, less musically literate audiences. The audience groaned when she died and gave her a much deserved standing ovation when she came back to life to take a bow. We need more opera singers who generate such enthusiasm.

Oropesa's achievement is doubly impressive because she does not possess a natural voice for Violetta. Despite her evident technical mastery and musical creativity (and an ability to be heard throughout the house absent five years ago) the voice lacks the Italianate warmth and glow, particularly at the ends of its register, one expects in this role. Oropesa's voice—cooler, slightly metallic, with a quick flutter—was much more common one hundred years ago; today we associate it with Gilda, the "ina" roles, various *bel canto* heroines, and Baroque opera. Creative though Oropesa is at finding ways to characterize within her means, I felt that some of pathos of a doomed woman escaped her, both musically and dramatically. That being said, this is an interpretation of this role any opera-goer should hear.

Alek Shrader's light tenor makes him, in some respects, an appropriate Alfredo to Oropesa's Violetta. He is also a sensitive and thoughtful musician who intermittently offered delicate phrasing and *mezza voce* singing, and, at times, popped off a stentorian line. But overall, his tenor

La traviata, Philadelphia

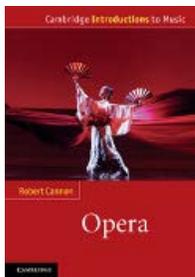
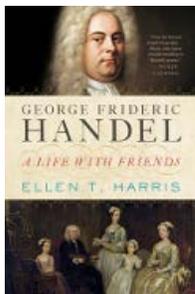
A review by Andrew Moravcsik

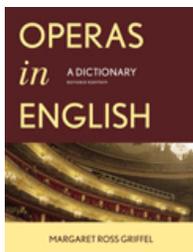
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and other neglected music-dramatists to the operatic stage.

English Touring Opera - Debussy, Massenet and Offenbach

English Touring Opera's recent programming has been ambitious and inventive, and the results have been rewarding. We had two little-known Donizetti operas, *The Siege of Calais* and *The Wild Man of the West Indies*, in spring 2015, while autumn 2014 saw the company stage comedy by Haydn (*Il mondo della luna*) and romantic history by Handel (*Ottone*).

Verismo Double Header in Los Angeles

LA Opera got its season off to an auspicious beginning with starry revivals of *Gianni Schicchi* and *Pagliacci*.

Viva Verdi at Opera Las Vegas

On September 9, 2015, Opera Las Vegas presented James Sohre's production of *Viva Verdi* at the Smith Center's Cabaret Jazz. It was a delightful evening of arias, duets and ensembles by Giuseppe Verdi (1813-1901). The program included many of the composer's blockbuster arias and scenes from famous operas such as *Aida*, *La traviata*, and *Macbeth*.

Barbera Sings a Fascinating Recital in San Diego

On Saturday, September 19, San Diego Opera opened its 2015-2016 season with a recital by tenor René Barbera. This was the first Polly Puterbaugh Emerging Artist Award Recital and no artist could have been more deserving than the immensely talented Barbera.

Sweeney Todd at the San Francisco Opera

Did the iconic "off-beat" and "serious" American musical hold the stage of the War Memorial Opera House? The excited audience (standees three deep) thought so and roared their appreciation.

Wigmore Hall Complete Schubert Song Series begins with Boesch and Johnson

The Wigmore Hall, London, has launched Schubert : The Complete Songs, a 40-concert series to run through the 2015 and 2016 seasons. There have been Schubert marathons before, like BBC Radio 3's all-Schubert week and The Oxford Lieder Festival's Schubert series last year, but the Wigmore Hall series will be a major landmark because the Wigmore Hall is the Wigmore Hall, the epitome of excellence.

Luisa Miller in San Francisco

Luisa Miller sits on the fringes of the repertory, and since its introduction into the modern repertory in the 1970's it comes around every 15 or so years. Unfortunately this 2015 San Francisco occasion has not bothered to rethink this remarkable opera.

Salieri: La grotta di Trofonio (Trofonio's Cave)

Demons by Pushkin and Peter Shaffer, Antonio Salieri lives in the public imagination as the embittered rival of Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart — whose genius he lamented and revered in equal measure, and against whom he schemed and plotted at the Emperor Joseph II's Viennese court.

Chicago Lyric's Stars Shine at Millennium Park

The annual concert given by Lyric Opera of Chicago as an outdoor event previewing the forthcoming season took place on 11 September 2015 at Millennium Park.

Gluck: Orphée et Eurydice

Orpheus — that Greek hero whose songs could enchant both deities and beasts, whose lyre has become a metaphor for the power of music itself,

voice lacks the ring, weight and silvery color required for this role. At times he is flatly inaudible, at other times, simply unconvincing—despite an effort to play Alfredo as a softer character. Shrader won the Met National Auditions in 2007—a moment immortalized in the film "The Audition"—but his voice seems less penetrating now than it did then, which is worrying.

As Giorgio Germont, Stephen Powell possesses much more of the voice we expect in Verdi: a large, dark resonant baritone that commands the stage from the moment he enters. Like Oropesa, he sings words as if he means them, and his Act II duet with her is (as it should be) the dramatic highlight of the evening—save perhaps for Violetta's two big arias. Occasionally, he modulates dynamics or color to fit the circumstances, but not nearly as much as he might. Were he do that more, and highlight the text more carefully, I see no reason why—in an era where casting directors wring their hands over the lack of Verdi baritones—Powell shouldn't be engaged by major houses worldwide.

La traviata contains its share of quirky minor characters. Standouts among them in this production are soprano Rachel Sterrenberg, a Curtis Institute student who sang well here as the maid Annina (as she did in the company's recent production of *Yardbird*), and bass-baritone Daniel Mobbs, a company veteran in such roles, who is appropriately deadpan as the Baron Douphol.

Music Director Corrado Rovaris can at times be uneven or cautious, but he is splendid here. The two famous preludes are played as if each is a single phrase, floated on a lovely veil of lovely *legatissimo* string playing, with the subtlest of dynamic inflections. (On Friday the effect was diluted, in the case of the Act 3 prelude, by those in the audience who coughed themselves back into otorhinolaryngological comfort after the intermission.) Elsewhere Rovaris keeps the tempo flowing and the volume from rising to a level that covers the singers.

The production is workaday but successful. The costumes are inoffensive, that is, elegant and a bit titillating without really expressing anything distinctive. The style aims for that 1950s revival look so fashionable with opera designers these days (I presume because it looks old, exotic and chic, but not *so* old and exotic that it might be taken as stuffy). And there is of course something for every taste: ladies in colorful dresses, ladies dressed as men, ladies showing a little leg, handsome men without shirts, etc. The set designs are agreeable and sensible: that is, simple, colorful, traditional and frugal, based on a unit set accessorized with varied furniture.

Andrew Moravcsik

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and whose journey to the Underworld to rescue his wife, Eurydice, kick-started the art of opera in Mantua in 1607 — has been travelling far and wide around the UK in 2015.

Vaughan Williams and Holst Double Bill

One is a quasi-verbatim rendering of J.M. Synge's bleak tale of a Donegal family's fateful dependency on and submission to the deathly power of the sea.

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