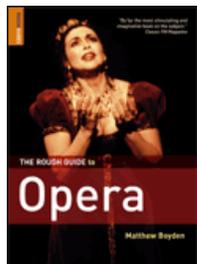


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By Francis Carlin Published: October 11 2004 03:00
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La mise en apesanteur divine de "Saint François d'Assise", SDF de la foi LE MONDE | 08.10.04 | 15h02 A l'Opéra Bastille, les tableaux franciscains d'Olivier Messiaen par Stanislas Nordey. Avec cette nouvelle production du Saint-François d'Assise de Messiaen -...

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Moscow Times: Entering the Ring

George Loomis reports on Wagner opera, Russian-style. By George Loomis Published: October 8, 2004
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Tamerlano, Opéra de Lille By Francis Carlin
Published: October 6 2004 03:00 | Last updated: October 6 2004 03:00 There should be a golden rule for producers: don't make life difficult for yourself and the audience. In Lille's magnificently restored...

Le Figaro on Charpentier Festival

FESTIVAL Marc-Antoine Charpentier à Ambronay
Triomphe de la jeunesse Gérard Corneloup [30 septembre 2004] En cette année du bicentenaire de la mort de Marc-Antoine Charpentier, occasion unique de le sortir de l'ombre que lui fait encore Lully, le festival d'Ambronay...

FROSCHE at Innsbruck

Die Frau ohne Schatten, Tiroler Landstheater, Innsbruck By Larry L Lash Published: September 29 2004 03:00 | Last updated: September 29 2004 03:00 It was a strange match: Richard Strauss's hugest, most difficult opera - with one of the largest...

Die Walküre at the Met

Die Walküre, Metropolitan Opera, New York By Martin Bernheimer Published: September 28 2004 03:00 | Last updated: September 28 2004 03:00 For the past couple of decades at the Metropolitan Opera, Die Walküre was the exclusive property of James Levine...

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11 Jul 2010

Semele, Paris

The Parisian press was plastered with photos of Daniele de Niese. The glamorous 31-year old Sri Lankan-Australian mega-star is everywhere these days: a new TV series ("Diva Diaries"), a Decca greatest hits CD ("Diva"), and, with her marriage to Guy Christie of the Glyndebourne ruling clan, a secure position as the first lady of English opera.

She was in Paris to appear in one of her signature roles—Semele, Ovid's overambitious nymph who pursues immortality but finds death—in Théâtre des Champs-Élysées revival of David McVicar's 2004 production of Händel's eponymous oratorio-opera.

I am not sure I would want to hear the whole performance again on tape, if one exists. Certainly I have no desire to seek out the obscure recording of the role de Niese made early in her career (Arion PV704021/22, deleted). Yet in the house, watching as well as listening, it made for a memorable evening. The Paris audience agreed, responding with a quarter hour of unrestrained cheers and rhythmic applause.



Jael Azzeretti and Vivica Genaux (as Juno)

My ambivalence stems from the fact that de Niese, as many have noted, is not a singer's singer. At the top her voice turns metallic, runs and registers are not

G. F. Handel: Semele

Danielle de Niese, soprano;
Jaël Azzaretti, soprano; Vivica Genaux, mezzo-soprano;
Stephen Wallace, counter-tenor;
Richard Croft, tenor; Peter Rose, bass. Les Talens Lyriques.
Christophe Rousset conductor.

Above: Danielle de Niese and Vivica Genaux (as Ino)

All photos by Alvaro Yanez

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La Rondine, New York City Opera By Martin Bernheimer Published: September 27 2004 03:00 | Last updated: September 27 2004 03:00 La Rondine certainly isn't Puccini's easiest or most successful opera. Completed in 1917, it flutters - sometimes elegantly, sometimes...

Andrew Patner Reviews Don Giovanni at the Lyric Opera

Don Giovanni, Lyric Opera, Chicago By Andrew Patner Published: September 21 2004 03:00 | Last updated: September 21 2004 03:00 A half century ago, a trio of twentysomething operaphiles offered Chicago what they dubbed a "calling card" production of Mozart's...

Faust in Hong Kong

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The Greek Passion, Royal Opera House, London By Andrew Clark Published: September 17 2004 03:00 | Last updated: September 17 2004 03:00 All human life is here: prayer and pageant, self-sacrifice and self-righteousness, humour and hypocrisy, feast and famine. Opera...

FT Reviews Tobias and the Angel

Tobias and the Angel, English Touring Opera, St John's Church, London By David Murray Published: September 16 2004 03:00 | Last updated: September 16 2004 03:00 The composer Jonathan Dove may have called his Tobias, now touring cathedrals and churches,...

FT Reviews LA Opera's Ariadne auf Naxos

Ariadne auf Naxos Music Center, Los Angeles By Allan Ulrich Published: September 15 2004 03:00 | Last updated: September 15 2004 03:00 William Friedkin's mounting of the Strauss-von Hoffmannsthal comedy handsomely and wittily confirms the general director Plácido Domingo's belief...

Le Figaro Reviews Pelléas et Mélisande at Palais Garnier

Debussy tout feu tout glace La critique de Jacques Doucelin [15 septembre 2004] Une salle qui tousse à gorge déployée en été, hors de toute épidémie de grippe, au mieux manque d'attention, au pire s'ennuie. Voilà le résultat du transfert...

FT: Ariadne auf Naxos, Welsh National Opera, Cardiff

Ariadne auf Naxos, Welsh National Opera, Cardiff By Richard Fairman Published: September 14 2004 03:00 | Last updated: September 14 2004 03:00 The Prologue to Ariadne auf Naxos is all about the backstage shenanigans before a performance - a bit...

NYT: Anne Midgette Reviews Katya Kabanova

CRITIC'S PICK | ANNE MIDGETTE A Star to Shed Light on Janacek's Bleak Operatic Landscape OPINIONS may differ as to what constitutes a highlight at the Metropolitan Opera these days, but few disagreed last season about Karita Mattila's performance as...

WSJ: The Comeback Composer

The Comeback Composer Opera World Taps Handel To Woo New Audiences; Cleopatra in Gold Lamé By HEIDI WALESON The last time Michael Goodman had season tickets to the Metropolitan Opera in New York City, Gerald Ford was president and pet...

FT: Martin Bernheimer reviews Daphne

Daphne New York City Opera By Martin Bernheimer Published: September 10 2004 03:00 | Last updated: September 10 2004 03:00 It took 66 years

perfectly even, and slightly strained vocal production precludes a genuine piano or legato. Though she has the notes, manages coloratura adequately, and possesses a distinctive smoky timbre in the middle of her voice, the overall impression can be monochromatic. From a purely musical perspective, de Niese cannot offer the listener the spell-binding moments conjured up by the very greatest exponents of the Baroque and classic repertoire.

Yet de Niese makes 150% of what remains. If she lacks the nightingale delicacy and elegant ornamentation most others deploy in Händel, she supplants it with earthy exuberance and youthful energy. Her beauty and disarmingly naturalistic style of acting—more like TV than opera—convey a modern type of dramatic conviction. With Semele, the result is a musical-dramatic portrait of a flesh-and-blood creature: a spoiled adolescent, pouting, panting and protesting by turns. None of this is subtle, musically or dramatically, yet it is a perfect match of singer and role. De Niese shines particularly brightly in dramatic confrontations, such as the coloratura quarrel with Jupiter that seals her doom (“No, no, I’ll take no less”), her eyes flashing as she spits out the runs—a moment that normally seems anemic. She is similarly at home exploiting her sex appeal, more as actress than singer, as when she seduces Jupiter by running her foot along his crotch. (Amazing what tenors get to do, these days!)



Stephen Wallace, Daniele de Niese, Peter Rose, and Vivica Genaux (as Ino)

For those who favor purely musical values, de Niese's colleagues offered greater rewards. Foremost among them was Peter Rose. Though surely among the most versatile of modern basses—in the past two months, he has sung Osmin in München, Ochs in Barcelona, Gurnemanz in Tokyo, and Falstaff in Seattle—Rose is hardly known as a Baroque specialist. Yet his Cadmus/Somnus was stylish and sonorous, underpinned by rock-solid lower register. At the end of Somnus's “Leave me, loathsome light,” he interpolated down an octave to a long B1 (at Baroque pitch that's almost a low b-flat). Resounding through the large theater like an organ pedal, it was one of the most astonishing notes I have heard in decades. Such vocal details were consistently accompanied by clear diction, convincing characterization, and sensitive phrasing.

The young Maltese-born, London-trained soprano Clair Debono made a



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for Richard Strauss's Daphne to reach a stage in New York. We must be grateful for belated...

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limpid Cupid, singing in a “correct” Baroque performance-practice style that contrasted with the other principals, delivered with great sensitivity. Debono, who’s been appearing under William Christie and Emmanuelle Haïm, dispatched the Act I aria, “Endless Love” (actually written for Semele) to great effect. McVicar had her wander the stage in red 18th century garb, a black cane, and pair of John Lennon-style sunglasses—a striking allusion to Cupid’s blindness.

Alaskan mezzo Vivica Genaux assumed the double-role of Semele’s dull sister Ino and the imperious goddess Juno, differentiating the two splendidly. She offered much of the stylistic subtlety that De Niese lacked, even if her voice is not the plushest. American tenor Richard Croft, a veteran from the 2004 who has recorded the role on the recent Curnyn/Grange recording, assumed the demanding tenor part of the philandering Jupiter. Every note was in place, though the voice seemed to lack the extra sheen I have heard in years past, for example in “Where’er you walk.” Could this reflect the strain of preparing the Met’s *Loge* in the fall?

Less satisfying was countertenor Stephen Wallace as Athamas, another 2004 returnee. His voice seems to be fragmenting, with four or five strong notes in the high-middle, surrounded by weakness and an almost tenorial bottom. French soprano Jaël Azzeretti sang beautifully as Iris, like Debono in a more classically Baroque fashion, but her diction suffered by comparison to an otherwise Anglophone cast.



Richard Croft and Danielle de Niese

McVicar’s production sets the entire opera in a single elegantly minimalist hemicyclical space. The action is understated, sometimes even ironic, with only one *coup de théâtre*: the moment when Jupiter removes his regal protective cloak from Semele’s shoulders and—like Don Giovanni—she sinks into a smoking floor. Otherwise, McVicar’s quietly elegant approach focuses the action on inter-personal relations. This helps translate a chorus-laden and declamatory oratorio into a more complex opera libretto. *Semele* becomes story not simply of the title character’s ambition, but of sibling rivalry. Ino is resentful: She wears spectacles, for example, symbolizing not only her plainness compared to her sexy sister, but the fact that that she, in contrast to blind Cupid or impulsive Semele, sees her true love from the start.

Overall the performance highlights the current state of Baroque opera performance, which has found new a compromise between the full-voiced dramatic style of the 1970s Handel revival and the purity of the 1980s and 1990s heyday of “authentic” practice. While harpsichordist cum conductor Christophe Rousset is steeped in the latter aesthetic, and continues to do

much to uncover new and obscure scores, his interpretive ideal in Händel opera remains Marilyn Horne. Rousset believes—I suspect he’s right—that Händel would approve of such an overtly dramatic approach, not least in an overtly witty and bawdy “tragedy” like *Semele*. Rousset’s conducting bristled a bit, rather at the expense of charm—though, to be sure, despite its wonders, Händel’s score lacks the orchestral range of Monteverdi or Mozart—but Les Talens Lyriques and the Choeur du Théâtre des Champs-Élysées followed with admirable virtuosity. Overall, the success of this hybrid Händel evening is a tribute to the leadership of Dominique Meyer, who promoted much Baroque opera at Champs-Élysées and with these performances leaves Paris to head the Wiener Staatsoper.

Andrew Moravcsik

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