

THE CHANGING ORIGINS OF MAN



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Defying Gravity

Why Ultra-Hot Cities Like New York, Paris and Shanghai Soar, Even as Global Real Estate Cools



Albania	Lek 600	Finland	€4.20	Israel	NIS 19.00	Norway	Kr 40.00	Slovenia	SIT 630/€2.83
Austria	€4.20	France	€4.20	Italy	€4.20	Poland (incl. tax)	PLN 12.30	Spain	€4.20
Belgium	€4.20	Germany	€4.20	Kazakhstan	\$4.30	Portugal (incl. tax)	€4.20	Sweden	SKr 33.00
Bulgaria	BGL 4.50	Gibraltar	£ 2.80	Latvia	\$4.30	Romania	Lei 10.85	Switzerland	SF 7.20
Croatia	KN 21.00	Greece	€4.20	Lithuania	\$4.30	Russia	\$4.30	Turkey	YTL 4.00
Cyprus	€2.80	Hungary	FL 590.00	Luxembourg	€4.20	Serbia and Montenegro	€4.20	Ukraine	€4.20
Czech Republic	CZK 110.00	Iceland	IKr 380.00	Malta	€4.20	Sierra Leone	€4.20	United Kingdom	£ 2.70
Denmark	Kr 37.00	Ireland (incl. tax)	€4.20	Netherlands	€4.20	Slovakia	€4.20	U.S. Forces	\$3.25

SOPRANOS

At the Cineplex

BY ANDREW MORAVCSIK

THE LINE FOR THE METROPOLITAN Opera snakes around the corner. A white-haired society woman clad in velvet rushes in out of the winter rain, passing out-of-towners clutching handmade NEED A TICKET signs. An older man waits with his 6-year-old granddaughter—the third generation to be introduced to live opera with this showing of Mozart's "The Magic Flute."

A classic scene outside Lincoln Center? Actually, no; it's a movie theater in Albany, New York, where the Met performance is about to be broadcast live. Similar scenes are occurring simultaneously at more than 100 venues around the world, from specially redesigned Japanese Kabuki theaters to Norway's oldest movie house, 483 kilometers above the Arctic Circle. It's all part of a bold initiative recently launched by the Met's new general manager, Peter Gelb, to popularize opera and perhaps save it from obscurity. He plans to beam six live performances by satellite to remote movie houses. Broadcasts began in December with "The Magic Flute," and will continue this spring with "The Barber of Seville" and "Il Trittico."

So far, popular response has surpassed expectations. Satellite attendance exceeded 90 percent, and is expected to total about 500,000 for the six operas. Many venues sold out in advance; encore performances have been scheduled. Last week the Met announced the addition of a German theater network keen to air the productions, and plans to expand next year from six to eight operas.

Some might argue it's better than being at the Met. Almost every seat is a good one. Surround-sound makes for great acoustics, capturing even the pre-performance bustle of the audience in New York. Ten high-definition cameras take viewers right up to the action onstage. Arts critic Douglas McLennan of *artsjournal.com* believes the resulting mix of close-ups, panoramas and orchestra shots reinterprets opera

The Met is drawing new opera fans by broadcasting live to cinemas. Popcorn munching encouraged.



with the expert editing, detail and emotional immediacy of film.

At intermission, the cameras transport virtual fans backstage—a privilege denied even the well connected in New York. When she is whisked offstage to her dressing room after a big aria, radiant soprano Anna Netrebko, star of January's "I Puritani," gives the camera a smile, a thumbs-up and a victory dance. Viewers can watch Katie Couric or Beverly Sills follow up with intermission interviews, and eavesdrop as stagehands rebuild the Met's massive sets. "Opera is the multimedia art form for a multimedia age," says Marc Scorca, who directs the Opera America association. The movie-theater setting helps overcome opera's image as stuffy and elitist—a perception fueled by high ticket prices and a rigorous code of silence. Indeed, virtual viewing lowers ticket prices from up to several hundred dollars at the Met to \$18 (\$15 for kids). And you can munch popcorn and slurp soda through the whole show, while the kids fidget, slump in their seats or conduct along with the music.

High-definition broadcasts are just

part of Gelb's broader vision for a new age of opera. A former Met usher and record-label hatchet man, Gelb, 52, likes to speak in apocalyptic terms about "reviving opera" and engineering its "salvation." He's got his work cut out for him; in the past five years, the average age of a Met spectator has risen from 60 to 65. "It isn't hard to see where that's leading," he says.

Gelb, who took over last August, has already shaken things up. He's slashed prices on the cheap tickets, heavily discounted rush tickets, broadcast opening night to Times Square, invited Broadway directors to stage operas, launched a Met station on satellite radio, inaugurated an open-house day and plastered New York subways with glamorous photos of opera's younger, more attractive stars. The basic idea is "to market opera like a live spectator sport," he says.

Critics fear that digitizing opera will dumb it down, or elevate glitzy staging and good looks above the singing itself. The inaugural "Magic Flute," they note, was not the real thing but a 100-minute abridged version, sung in English and produced by Julie Taymor, who serves up colorful puppets as in her Broadway production of Disney's "The Lion King." Stars in other operas have been selected for their visual appeal; though she can really sing, Netrebko, a lovely young Russian, is hyped as "Audrey Hepburn with a voice." Arts critic Pierre Ruhe of *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution* worries that by providing live opera with celebrity singers at cheap prices, the Met will encourage people to abandon their struggling local companies. "What's good for the Met is not necessarily good for opera," he says.

Gelb argues that the broadcasts are "good for opera lovers everywhere," because they spark interest in the art form. Those lucky enough to procure a ticket to the local cinema would surely agree. One need only watch audience members stand in ovation and yell "Bravo!"—even when no one can hear but themselves. ■

CHEAP ARIAS:
In Burbank (left),
fans of the Met watch
'The Magic Flute'

