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- COMMENTARY
- FEATURED OPERAS
- NEWS
- REPERTOIRE
- REVIEWS
- STORE
- ABOUT
- CONTACT
- LINKS

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Recently in Performances

RECENTLY IN PERFORMANCES

Geez, Louise

“Quelle plaisir” to encounter Gustave Charpentier’s seldom performed “Louise” at the Paris Opera in a production where most everything went spectacularly right.

Die Soldaten

Bernd Alois Zimmermann was a sensitive, none too healthy 21-year-old music prodigy in 1939, when he was drafted into the German army.

Troilus triumphant in Saint Louis

For Sir William Walton, the protracted genesis of *Troilus and Cressida* must have seemed more akin to the agonies of Sisyphus than to the composition of an opera.

CANDIDE – English National Opera, London Coliseum

Originating at the Châtelet, where the narration was given in French, Robert Carsen’s staging of Bernstein’s unique satire worked rather well in its television broadcast from the Parisian house late in 2006.

A Brescian Butterfly and a bewildering Hoffman at Opera Theatre of Saint Louis

The disastrous 1904 La Scala premiere of Giacomo Puccini’s *Madame Butterfly* is one of those famous annals of opera which tend to leave today’s audiences perplexed about all the uproar.

Grant Park Music Festival: “20th-Century Masters.”

The concert “20th-Century Masters,” presented by the Grant Park Music Festival, Chicago on 27 and 28

Performances

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PERFORMANCES



20 Jul 2008

Idomeneo and Doktor Faust at München Opernfestspiele

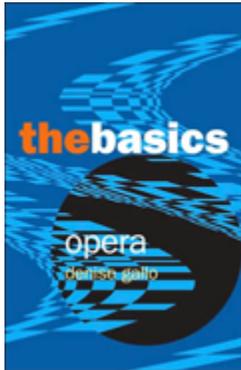
The Bayerische Staatsoper, based in three spectacular houses where Mozart, Wagner and many other composers premiered their works, presents over 300 annual performances to a discerning public.

Some of what one hears there is as fine as any opera in the world today; the rest comes close. München’s July [Summer Festival](#) may lack the superstar glitz of neighboring Salzburg, but it offers wider repertoire in greater acoustical intimacy at one third the price —and, outside the door, the urban amenities are far more plentiful. This year I attended new

Above: Scene from *Doktor Faust* (photo courtesy of Bayerische Staatsoper)

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Opera: The Basics



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June 2008 featured several pieces performed for the first time under the auspices of the Festival.

San Francisco Opera summer season, 2008

David Gockley heard the cries of many an opera fan that Pamela Rosenberg had denied them their 'stars,' so for his summer season, 2008, he brought them Natalie Dessay, Susan Graham, Ruth Ann Swenson, and Stefan Margita.

Unusual Fare at Opera Festival of St. Louis

My visit to two rarely mounted pieces at the Opera Festival of St. Louis brought to mind the little girl with the curl, for when it was good, it was very very good and when it was bad, it was, um. . . er. . .

Don Carlo at Royal Opera House

In the latter part of last year, the casting for Nicholas Hytner's new production of *Don Carlo* — in the five-act Italian version — looked to be on shaky ground.

Don Giovanni. No, the other one

No one has ever called Gazzaniga's *Don Giovanni* an overlooked masterpiece.

A rare treasure in Saint Louis. . .

Pink flamingos, sheep on wheels, and a queen crowned with giant antlers all inhabit the zany world of Opera Theatre of Saint Louis's *Una cosa rara*, where the artificial 18th century pastoral commingles with cutesy country colors and 1950s yard art.

Plácido Domingo's miraculous autumn

On the barren stage: a few chairs, a dark-gold hectoplasm projected on the wood panels of the acoustic chamber - nothing more.

See Venice and then die

For the belated Spanish premiere of Britten's *Death in Venice*, 35 years after its creation in Aldeburgh, Barcelona seems a felicitous choice.

Star Power in Paris "Capuleti"

For Bellini's "I Capuleti e i Montecchi," Paris Opera peopled its revival with plenty of star power.

productions of Mozart's *Idomeneo* and Busoni's *Doktor Faust*.

The *Idomeneo* was bound to be special, as it marked the 350th anniversary of the construction of the Cuvillies Theater—a Rococo gem where Mozart premiered the work in 1781. (But not, strictly speaking, the very spot where he did so. The theater was dismantled during World War II to avoid Allied bombing that destroyed its original location in Munich's downtown Residenz Palace. It was reconstructed after the war in an adjoining section of the palace.) The theater has recently been newly re-renovated with the attention to detail that epitomizes the Bavarian devotion to their past, including a delicate pastel-colored forecourt, now glass-covered, that magically shifts mood with the deepening summer twilight.

Idomeneo marked Mozart's operatic liberation. The invitation to write an opera for München in 1781 freed the young composer from Salzburg's provincial confines. For the first time, some of Europe's best musicians were at his disposal. In the overture, Mozart's pent-up energy explodes in bravura wind passages, sharp brass chords, and sweeping orchestral *tuttis*. The architectural anniversary was surely an appropriate moment to let the orchestra, led by München's Music Director Kent Nagano, speak for itself.

It was not to be. No sooner had Nagano given the downbeat than dozens of soldiers dressed in football pads *cum* Star Wars Storm Trooper suits ran on stage to simulate Trojan War tableaux with a ruckus of splattered blood. And so it went. Dieter Dorn's chaotic visual energy can be invigorating, but it is more often exhausting, burying Mozart under mayhem. He tends, moreover, to fall back on *Regietheater* clichés: the rear wall of the theater served as the backdrop, broken historical artifacts littered the stage, costumes confused time and place, crowds glared angrily at aristocrats, who in turn clutched the scenery.

Still, I have to confess I loved a few of Dorn's concepts. During Elettra's final showpiece aria, rather than having her squirm and twist in a torment of "serpents and adders", as one conventionally sees, Elettra inadvertently calls forth slimy, blood-stained furies out of the floor, who pull her down to hell—a

Opera with a human heart

When the Ringling Brothers folded their tents, opera took over. Aida with elephants, and Walküre with real horses.

St. Francis in Amsterdam

It is a bit hard to know what to make of Olivier Messiaen's colossal piece "Saint François d'Assise," beautifully mounted by Netherlands Opera.

Zurich Has Malibran to Thank

If you are going to produce Jacques Fromental Halevy's forgotten opera "Clari," I urge you to first make sure you have a signature on the contract from a superstar with the firepower of Cecilia Bartoli.

Der Rosenkavalier at ENO

It is worth remembering that prior to the première of Strauss's opera in 1911, the working title was 'Ochs auf Lerchenau'.

Il Matrimonio Segreto in Brooklyn

Opera producers in quest of headlines, unable to make them from the limited number of Mozart operas available (all of them far too familiar) but equipped with the flood of attractive young singers trained to sing Mozart in conservatories (because singing Mozart does not harm young voices, and singing Verdi and Wagner before 30 – better yet, 40 – often will), sometimes turn to Mozart's contemporary, Cimarosa, and his *Il Matrimonio Segreto*, to get attention.

MUSSORGSKY: Khovanshchina

At the curtain call for the first night of WNO's new production of the infrequently performed *Khovanshchina* director David Pountney wore a simple Russian shirt.

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female *Don Giovanni*. It is high camp, of course, but it brings the text onomatopoeically to life. In a more realistic production, it would work even better: Someone should steal the idea.

Musically, this *Idomeneo* labors under two disadvantages. First, despite the charm and intimacy of the Cuvilliés, everyone sounds hoarse. Unflattering acoustics, it is said, are a result of a concrete shell irreversibly laid in the post-war renovation. Second, who decided to eschew the now commonplace mezzo Idamante in favor of a tenor, with its far less poignant Act III writing? (While we are at it, who decided, amidst an otherwise largely uncut Idomeneo—indeed, with the extra ballet music at the end—to excise the second verse of "O voto tremendo", one of the most spine-tingling moments in all of Mozart opera?) We live, after all, in an era of great lyric mezzos. I hope the decision was not taken to profile the Slovakian tenor Pavol Breslik. He may be the hot young Mozartian in Europe today. But his heady, unsupported tone grated after a while and seemed not to promise a long career. Perhaps I just caught him on an off night or in unfavorable acoustics.

Far more impressive—the highlight of the evening vocally—was John Mark Ainsley in the title role. To be sure, the voice is on the light side for a role often assumed these days by heavyweights (even Plácido Domingo). But one hears every note *come scritto* and unfudged, with interpolations superadded—a spectacular achievement rare on stage. Juliane Banse, by contrast, sounded as if she may have outgrown Ilia, at least in small halls: Unevenness of color and weight undermined the nobility of her characterization. Rainer Trost's Arbace had more weight and warmth, but the voice sounds worn. Young Berlinerin Annette Dasch made an exciting, good-looking, but vocally bland, Elettra.

Nagano's approach was more relaxed and less idiosyncratic than in his 2004 Los Angeles performances, and the orchestra responded brilliantly. Yet one wondered why he was conducting *Idomeneo* when he might have waited one night and conducted the premiere of Busoni's unfinished masterpiece, *Doktor Faust*—a score of which he is perhaps today's leading exponent, having recorded it for Erato just a few years ago.

Instead we got Tomáš Netopil, a young Czech about whom no one knew much. Conducting Busoni is a difficult task: The polyglot composer cycles through an eclectic range of forms, which he deploys with a mixture of German modernism and Italianate post-Romanticism. Netopil's take on Busoni is impressive without being entirely convincing: He thins the orchestral sound to an impressionist shimmer, then punctuates it with harsh expressionist blasts. Despite the fuller acoustics of the National Theater, one feels the absence of Busoni's sensuous Italian side, as well as any serious attempt to integrate the score into a compelling whole.

The rising young Wagnerian baritone Wolfgang Koch, making his house debut, strained at times to project over Netopil's orchestra, but nonetheless handled the title role with clear tone and diction. Still, his is not a characterization distinctive enough to challenge memories of Fischer-Dieskau or Hampson. British tenor John Daszak did justice to Mephistopheles, if similarly without that extra touch of suaveness and assurance. The Duchess of Parma, by contrast, is a sure-fire soprano turn. She comes on midway through a "difficult" opera without other female leads: The setting is romantic, the character sexy, the music Busoni at his most Puccinian, and (in this production) she takes off most of her clothes. No wonder Californian Catherine Naglestad was an audience favorite. With shimmering Mozartian tone, she earned it honestly.

And what of the staging? Like Dorn's *Idomeneo*, Nicolas Brieger's production of *Doktor Faust* is constructed like a contemporary art work: a series of stunning, sometimes shocking visual tableaux that do not quite add up. The idea is to present Faust as mid-life crisis: a frustrated and solipsistic modern artist—a man stuck in a rut of sterile self-portraiture—gets in touch with his inner demons. The idea is hackneyed, even a bit silly, but some of his theatrical concepts are clever: The temptations of youth are bronze nude dancers hanging from the ceiling. Mephistopheles emerges from Faust's ass as an evil twin biker in drag. The Parma scene ends with only the adulterous duchess's wedding dress left standing center stage. Faust conjures up Helen of Troy in the form of large letters spelling H-E-L-E-N-A: an abstraction, rather than a reality.

Yet much else muddied the central concept: Why, in the mid-life crisis view, is

Parma the land of Fascist bosses, pastel zoot-suits and tiny buildings? Why is Wittenberg filled with candles? Why is Faust an artist anyway? As often the case in director-led productions, moreover, visual pyrotechnics come at the cost of stage direction: Faust and the Devil grimace and fulminate, but rarely truly engage with one another.

At the end of the evening, the directorial team opted for neither of the available conclusions to Busoni's unfinished score, but instead abruptly stopped the music where Busoni broke off his composition. Following the trail blazed by the San Francisco Opera, the final lines were spoken—an unsettling, enigmatic solution to a perennial problem.

Overall, *Idomeneo* and *Doktor Faust* were sophisticated and engaging near-misses. Uneven casting, odd conducting choices, and directorial overkill seemed to confirm rumors that the Bayerische Staatsoper is suffering from a crisis of leadership since the departure of former Intendant Peter Jonas in 2006. Local newspapers report that the arrival of Intendant Klaus Bachler from Vienna this fall may even place Nagano's status in question. One hopes not, and that this excellent company will instead refocus its energy in the years to come. Even so, a few days at the Bayerische Staatsoper are always very much worth the trip.

Andrew Moravcsik

[Click here for a photo gallery of *Idomeneo*.](#)

[Click here for a photo gallery of *Doktor Faust*.](#)

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