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# Opera



**'Die Fledermaus' at Glyndebourne**  
**Daniele Gatti: in Bologna's driving seat**  
**Handel and enchantment**  
**'Klever Kaff': Ferrier remembered**  
**Mercadante's 'Emma d'Antiochia'**



the Zurich unveiling on June 1 turned out to be the nadir of the season. The incredibly old-fashioned production crammed the stage with props and dry-ice vapours, which one wished would engulf the stage completely to cover all the clumsy business. Vladimir Fedoseyev was a reliable rather than inspiring conductor, and the rhythmically slack performance was often too loud. Ruggero Raimondi has matured in the title role, and he still sounds rather impressive even if his voice is somewhat ragged around the edges. **Dulcinée** was a new acquisition for Vesselina Kasarova, and she was exquisite in every respect: the role fits her darkly glowing voice handsomely, and she makes both a sexy courtesan and a deeply moving, sensitive woman whose own ideals complement those of her frustrated suitor. Charles Chausson sounded healthily robust but too monochrome as **Sancho**—perhaps a victim of Faggioni's disinterest in his character. HORST KOEGLER

## United States

### Cincinnati

**CINCINNATI OPERA** just keeps on raising its game. This season featured the company's first 21st-century work—William Bolcom's *Medusa*, previously heard in New York only in concert—as part of an enterprising triple bill produced by the company's artistic director, Nicholas Muni. In tandem with this was *Turandot*; but this too had an unfamiliar edge, as the staging was one of the first in the US to use the Berio ending. Muni's policy of looking for something new in everything he presents is bearing fruit—and to judge from reactions at the performances at **MUSIC HALL** on June 26 and 27, the festival's loyal audience is quite happy to go along with him.

*Medusa* was the final one-acter of an evening that began with La *Voix humaine* and continued with *Die sieben Todsünden*, with Brian Saletsky conducting the versatile players of the Cincinnati Symphony Orchestra in all three works. Excepting the contributions of the four-member 'family' and two dancers in the **Weill**, we were therefore effectively looking at three one-woman shows. And who better to carry

*Catherine Malfitano and her four presidential advisors in 'Die sieben Todsünden' in Cincinnati*



them than the indefatigable Catherine Malfitano? It's hard to think of anyone else who could have brought the same wealth of experience in stagecraft, formidable yet still-sweet soprano, and communicative way with three languages.

*La Voix humaine* took place around a car crashed into a lamp-post; in Dany Lyne's designs, a huge rear-view mirror in the centre of the stage reflected the eyes of the man Elle could not leave behind. Her crawling from the wreckage of the car was an obvious analogy for her crawling from that of her relationship. But other details—notably the ending, with Elle walking away from us into a bright light—suggested this crash was perhaps another suicide attempt, this time successful, and that the conversation we witnessed was played out in flashback. Either way, it was an effective modern realization, given that some aspects of the work—the references to party lines, for a start—are always going to resist updating.

That rear-view mirror was still there for *Die sieben Todsünden*, the evening's highlight. Here it helpfully displayed Anna's current sin of choice, writ large in bright cartoon-strip letters, as we were whizzed along on her journey through the pitfalls of stardom. Malfitano played both the singing and the dancing Annas—she got round their little 'Ja Anna? Ja, Anna!' conversations early on by talking to a polaroid of herself. During the commentaries the 'family' quartet sang behind a whole series of disguises: in turn, Anna was exhorted to greater things by a walking replica of Mount Rushmore; cardboard cut-outs of Monroe, Dietrich, Madonna and Michael Jackson; poster boards of Reagan, Clinton and Bushes Sr and Jr; and then four police in riot gear, giving the chalk outline of a miscreant the kind of going-over that allegedly sparked the riots in this area of Cincinnati just a few years ago. The 'greed' episode showed a kaleidoscope of film stills of Anna the celebrity endorsing more products than David Beckham in a Japanese ad break. The American dream to which she returned home was summed up by a satellite dish, a convertible and a nice shiny set of golf clubs. This is a vibrant, dazzlingly slick production, razor sharp and genuinely funny; some UK company should snap it up sharpish.

*Medusa* is perhaps not quite an opera—the character has nobody to react to in her narration but the audience, and it's easy to see it functioning adequately as a concert work. But Muni's staging did add atmosphere and focus, surrounding Malfitano with textured blue sheets to suggest her seaswept home and with ropes that adjusted its aspect. With a sometimes flippant libretto by Arnold Weinstein (he rhymes 'Neptune' with 'inept tune') and much hissing and exaggerated *Sprechgesang* as the 'Med-oooo-zah!' describes how horrible she has become, the work needed a singer of Malfitano's conviction to carry it off, or we might all have got the giggles. But it's an effective piece, just the right length at 40 minutes, carefully scored for strings and making much use of buzzing textures and eerie harmonics without overdoing them.

*Turandot* the following night was given in James Robinson's staging, a bold, colourful and imaginative co-production already seen at Minnesota Opera. One striking aspect that emerged was that in Berio's realization the work does rather badly by its two female characters. The long passage for Turandot as she awakes to the uncomfortable truth of her love for Calaf not only makes Liu's death scene seem less important; its uncertainty and sudden expressionistic turmoil also diminishes Turandot herself. If Puccini wanted to make a rounded character of this fairy-tale anti-princess, surely he would have put in more groundwork in the earlier scenes?

Calaf, who had comparatively little soul-searching to do, was ringingly sung by Dean Peterson; still, it was hard to feel good about Eva Urbanová's mettlesome and often sensitive princess being subdued by a prince with little but a nice, unindulgent

'Nessun dorma' to recommend him. But **Measha Brueggergosman's** Liù brought the house down, and you couldn't begrudge this fine young singer that.

ERICA JEAL

## Cincinnati

In a rare look back at the 'good old days' (as some would have it), CINCINNATI OPERA imported Lyric Opera of Chicago's old-fashioned, opulent production of *La traviata* (designed by Desmond Heeley). Thor Steingruber's sensible staging made much of relationships among the secondary characters while keeping the principals to the fore. Hasrnik **Papian's** Violetta melted hearts with her touchingly dignified characterization and her warm voice. A bit more agility in the coloratura antics of Act 1 would have helped, but this scarcely distracted from her performance. Miroslav Dvorsky's burly Alfredo was a touching contrast. Musically he was a bit

unsubtle, but he was a **sympathetic** partner to **Papian**. Mark Delevan's dark, **bur-** edged **Germont** is not the typical Verdi baritone sound, but it is most attractive. His emotional commitment and interpretation of the text were highly rewarding. After an excessively exuberant Act 1 on the opening night (July 10), Xian Zhang settled down to demonstrate just why she won the **Maazel/Vilar** Conductors' Competition in New York. She led a most idiomatic performance, reasonable while still emotional; sympathetic to the needs of the singers while holding tight the orchestral reins.

On July 19 Lauren Flanigan took on the difficult tide role of *Norma* for the first time. Although it was not an entirely happy occasion, Flanigan turned in an extraordinary performance. This was a very personal, touchingly human interpretation with great interest in the small details that make for an in-depth characterization. The emotional agony and impact of her '**Quel cor tradisti**' in the final scene was heart-stopping. Yet one could not ignore the vocal difficulties. Lightness and agility were in short supply, with sagging pitch and upper-register shrillness on occasion. Act 1 was particular ungainly, with an excessively laboured '**Casta diva**' not helped by the excessively slow tempo of the conductor Marco **Zambelli**. In Act 2 a more confident, controlled Flanigan took over, building in intensity and vocal authority.

The **Adalgisa** of Kristine Jepson simply could not be faulted. With a tone alternating cream and silk, she was completely comfortable in the *bel canto* style. Dario Volonte's Pollione was stalwart, commanding and healthy-toned, though slightly lacking in vocal opulence. Dean Peterson's seasoned bass was a bit too seasoned, but he made a serious, dignified Orovoso. **Zambelli's** overview of the opera—noble, grand, and slow—was a correct one, but more of a compromise with Flanigan would have been helpful.

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Nicholas Muni created this production some years ago for Seattle Opera. For Flanigan it's been restudied. At its best, it is loaded with penetrating insights and explanations of personal relationships, with subtle historical references. The psychological power of **Norma** over her Druid subjects, and the relationship of Pollione and his children, were particularly well handled. **CHARLES H. PARSONS**

## New York

This year's sprawling edition of the **LINCOLN CENTER FESTIVAL** featured 20 performances by the Kirov Opera, presented in tandem with the Met. The Russian invasion of America's leading culture-mall, the first of its kind since 1988, **didn't** begin auspiciously on July 8. The vehicle was Prokofiev's obscure *Semyon Kotko*, and advance publicity was sparse. One could have fired a cannon into the 4,000-seat house and harmed hardly a soul.

It would be difficult to pretend that *Semyon Kotko* is a masterpiece *per se*. The clunky libretto, based on **Katayev's** novella *I Am a Son of the Labouring Masses*, depicts a brave soldier's defence of Bolshevism against evil counter-revolutionaries and Germanic invaders after World War I. The score, a rambling fusion of lyrical flights, crusty conversations, chugging ostinatos, folksy indulgences, pathetic arias, gut-thumping choruses and snazzy instrumental commentary, finds Prokofiev trying desperately to be accessible to Stalin's masses. Even so, the music remains stubbornly sophisticated, intricate in detail, vital even in its hand-me-down passions.

This period piece was conducted by Valery Gergiev with rousing sympathy. It was staged by **Yury Alexandrov** with a ponderous air of sarcasm, replete with allusions to the **Ku Klux Klan** and Mao in a revisionist finale. Semyon **Pastukh's** symbolist set displayed railroad tracks, a crashed locomotive and assorted industrial relics surrounding a central cave. Ultimately, a modern political cartoon supplanted Socialist realism. Remarkably sensitive yet powerful in the title role, Victor Lutsyuk dominated the massive ensemble.

Rimsky-Korsakov's *Legend of the Invisible City of Kitezh*, which turned up on July 17, suggests a wondrous combination of the sublime and ridiculous, the profound and ponderous. Completed in 1904, the somewhat repetitive score is awash in piquant Wagnerian allusion and brilliant orchestral colour, ornamented with lots and lots of bells. The gutsy rhetoric spans fine lyrical indulgence and clever dramatic detail en route to vast heroic climaxes. Vladimir Belsky's libretto dabbles in mystical mumbo-jumbo, perfumed piety and formula folklore. Still, for all its inequity, this ultra-Russian concoction can be genuinely moving if performed with expressive conviction.

No such luck here. **Dmitry Chernyakov's** 2001 staging scheme toyed with oh-so-deep modernist abstraction just when one longed for an innocent, literal approach to mirror the music. The essential nature-imagery was muted at best, contradicted at worst. Stylized rituals clogged the narrative. The all-important choral action often froze in oratorio-society tableaux. The medieval setting emerged clumsily abstracted, the protagonists dressed in contemporary mufti, the scene littered with odd industrial symbols. Chernyakov couldn't make the **kitsch** invisible in his *Kitezh*.

Still, the ubiquitous Gergiev conducted as if lives were at stake. As Fevronia, the long-praying maiden of the forest, **Mlada Khodoley** exuded sympathy even when her luminous soprano turned edgy. Oleg Balashov was properly fervent as