

Daily Advertiser declared it ‘a masterly composition’, which ‘does great honour to Salieri’. This beguiling production does full justice to the opera, with the resourcefulness and clarity that are hallmarks of Bampton Classical Opera. CLAIRE SEYMOUR

Un ballo in maschera and Die Entführung aus dem Serail

West Green House Opera, July 22 and 29

The Prima Donna and Tenor from West Green House Opera’s 2015 *Ariadne auf Naxos* returned in 2017 for Amelia and Riccardo in *Un ballo in maschera*. Rebecca Nash has Senta in her repertoire, while Jonathan Stoughton is a rising Siegfried, so their substantial (though not essentially Verdian) voices made quite an impact in the Hampshire festival’s 400-seat auditorium. Nash commanded her wide-ranging role with dense, scything tone, her commitment and insight compensating for occasional ungainliness. The cold for which Stoughton apologized became apparent only at the climaxes of the love duet, and his singing, forthright and thrusting, made his Riccardo more sincere than mercurial. As Anckarstroem, George von Bergen portrayed a husband deeply hurt and disappointed, not just angered, by his apparent betrayal, and he sounded mightily resonant at full throttle, though softer in focus at lower dynamics.

Both designing and directing, Richard Studer set his tight, stylish production in what might be called timeless modern dress, favouring clean lines and colours. The set design centred on an expressionistically skewed, open-sided unit in which chandeliers were suspended for the ball. In the final scene the entire chorus was dressed and masked in black, leaving no hiding place for the ill-fated protagonists. Oscar, sung with a firm, zesty gleam by Galina Averina, wore 18th-century dress throughout, while Maria Gulik as Madame Arvidson was a Carmen figure—young, sexy and not missing a thing—and she supplied luxuriant if sometimes cloudy tone. Matthew Stiff as Ribbing and, in particular, Piotr Lempa as Horn sounded genuinely dark and sinister as they conspired to murder their king. The starkness and momentum of the drama on stage was reflected in the conducting of Jonathan Lyness, who drew a deep-hued sound from the festival’s 30-piece orchestra.

■ Jonathan Stoughton (*Gustavo*) and Galina Averina (*Oscar*) in the final scene of ‘*Un ballo in maschera*’ at West Green House

Perhaps surprisingly, the orchestra for the festival’s second production, *Die Entführung aus dem Serail*, was slightly larger than for *Ballo*, but it needed to include four percussionists. It was a different ensemble, the Melos Sinfonia, and the ‘Turkish’ music jangled splendidly under the baton of its founder Oliver Zeffmann. He took a historically informed



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approach, albeit with modern instruments (natural trumpets excepted), and the score emerged with captivating freshness, whether in passages of exquisite, floating delicacy or an epic Act 2 quartet that rode a wave of energy. Like the instrumentalists and conductor, the excellent cast—soloists and an incisive, eight-strong chorus—had youth on its side. Heather Engebretson, a spitfire Constanze, produced an astonishingly ample, vibrant sound and surmounted the role's technical demands fearlessly. Athletic lyricism characterized the Belmonte of Oliver Johnston, a recent graduate of the Royal Academy of Music, who was particularly fine in 'Ich baue ganz', while Nicholas Sharratt—also a supple lyric tenor, but airier of tone—made a stylish, thoroughly engaging Pedrillo. Elizabeth Cragg played Blonde as a glamorous woman with attitude, expressing herself confidently in tones of more than soubrettish substance. The character that gained most in Rafael R. Villalobos's probing production (his first UK project) was Osmin. No conventional buffoon, he liked to flex his muscles—both literally and figuratively—and used 'ho, ho, ho' humour as a sardonic threat. Barnaby Rea encompassed all this while singing in honeyed tones, sounding like a bass-baritone until he descended comfortably below the stage.

Villalobos's re-examination of the *Singspiel* put a major new twist in the tale: during the overture, preparations were under way for the wedding of Constanze and Belmonte, but she left him at the altar, choosing instead to go to Selim. Some indulgence was required for this reading of the text, but it certainly added a jolting charge to the dynamics between Constanze, Belmonte and Selim, a young man of both sensitivity and sensitivities in Klemens Koehring's performance: by the end he was a broken figure. Koehring is a bilingual actor, but he was not alone in delivering the German dialogue with pace and meaning. It constituted a motive force in a show that provided ample and invigorating reward for the risks that it took.

YEHUDA SHAPIRO

Le Comte Ory

Dorset Opera at Bryanston School, Blandford Forum, July 25

Rossini's shameless recycling of *Il viaggio a Reims* as *Le Comte Ory* appears only occasionally in the UK, and Dorset Opera delivered the composer's adieu to comic opera with unforgettable panache and a dream team in the three lead roles. How Roderick Kennedy's festival gets two shows (*Faust* was their other production this year) up and running in their summer school of just over two weeks is anyone's guess, and the results were impressive.

With *Ory*, there is no point in pussyfooting around a plot in which a lascivious noble disguised first as a hermit/guru with wandering hands and then as a nun with a retinue of similarly en-habited 'sisters' preys on a château-load of women whose husbands have gone away on a Crusade—and David Phipps-Davis duly aimed his staging straight at the funny-bone. Steve Howell's set was French Renaissance viewed at some distance through a bright Disneyfied lens, and Rebecca Hopkins's costumes were just as cartoony. With sighing women in skimpy night attire and a platoon of bearded 'nuns' getting plastered on the contents of the castle's wine cellar, the visual humour was broad and bracing, and Phipps-Davis then surpassed himself in Act 2's saucy and briskly choreographed threesome scene, in which the hero, in love with the Countess Adèle, discovered her in bed with his page Isolier and anything, including a sheep, was up for grabs.