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Opera

Muscat's Royal Opera House
The inaugural World Opera Forum

INTERVIEWS

**Susan Graham, Stéphane Degout,
George Benjamin, Will Crutchfield**

FESTIVALS PREVIEW

**Lyon, St Louis, Holland,
Aix, Teatro Nuovo**



Spain

Barcelona

Neither wine nor cava but love potions were the drinks to be seen with before and after Christmas at the UCEU, with *Tristan und Isolde* and *L'elisir d'amore* bringing their quite dissimilar qualities to enthusiastic audiences. Wagner's opera (seen on November 28) benefited from the nocturnal symbolism of Àlex Ollé's production for La Fura dels Baus, originated in Lyon, with Alfons Flores's suggestive sets, Urs Schönebaum's perceptive lighting and Franc Aleu's evocative videos.

Josep Pons's conducting was more prone to underline with care the details in the score than to pay attention to the long line, but the orchestra members play wonderfully for their music director. Iréne Theorin was a warm-voiced *Isolde*, temperamental in the first act, full of emotion in her transfiguration. After an ungainly start, Stefan Vinke grew in confidence, becoming a convincing embodiment of *Tristan's* agony. Sarah Connolly's compassionate Brangäne, Albert Dohmen's poignant Marke and Greer Grimsley's forceful Kurwenal were other fine assets of the performance.

Relocated to fascist Italy (with the look of a neo-realist film set, and with costumes by Marcelo Grande), Mario Gas's familiar production of *L'elisir d'amore* (seen on January 8) keeps all its freshness and heart, a perfect vehicle for changing casts. The 2018 version was led by Jessica Pratt, revealing in her debut as Adina a most impressive display of vocal pyrotechnics that outshone Pavol Breslik's affectionate Nemorino. Roberto de Candia's *Dulcamara* was stronger than Paolo Bordogna's *Belcore*, and Ramón Tebar conducted with a steady hand.

XAVIER CESTER

Vigo

It was truly remarkable to see the number of enthusiastic young people in a packed TEATRO AFUNDACIÓN for the performance of *Rigoletto* on November 5, organized by the committed Amigos de la Ópera de Vigo. This sight would certainly have been the envy of many other Spanish theatres. Luis Cansino, Galicia's own ambassador for Verdi, returned to the city in the title role, one he has sung often. His was a moving performance that accentuated the human dimension of the character, most especially in a wonderful 'Cortigiani vil razza'. The Ukrainian Olena Sloia (*Gilda*) and the Mexican Fabián Lara (*Duke of Mantua*), both under 30, are names to watch. Sloia, sincere in expression, with an assured technique, was also a fine actress. Lara showed off his brilliant, sustained high notes in 'La donna è mobile'. Cristian Díaz (*Sparafucile*) had a penetrating lower register and Sandra Ferrández (*Maddalena*) exuded sultry sensuality. In smaller roles, Marina Penas had beautifully plush tones for Countess Ceprano and Giovanna, while Pedro Martínez Tapia was a distinguished Marullo.

Diego García Rodríguez led the eager Orquesta Sinfónica Vigo 430 and the harmonious Coro Rías Baixas. His precise reading of Verdi was appreciated but at times the ensemble singing was imbalanced. The director Ignacio García is representative of a new generation of Spanish directors; he has a solid background in theatre but has firmly established himself in opera in Spain and beyond. His production was in flashback mode, the curtain rising on the final scene with *Gilda* in her sack. The set (designed by Alejandro Contreras) was angular, with sombre lighting (Contreras and García). There was very little stage movement, which gave the performance a static, wooden feel.

VICTORIA STAPELIS

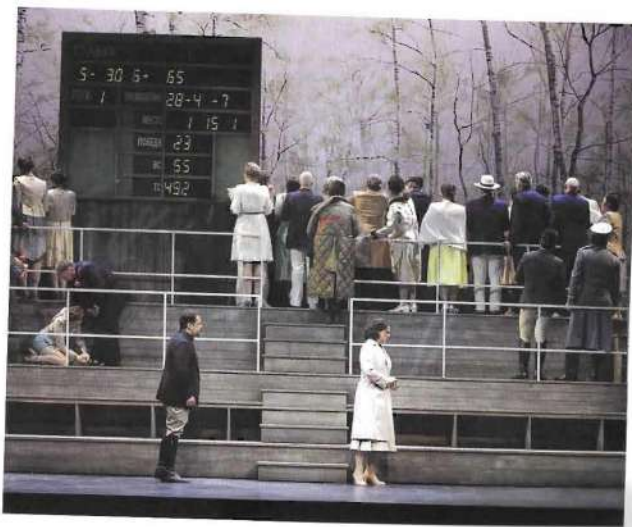
Switzerland

Bern

The name of the Hungarian Jenő Hubay (1858-1937) is little known beyond the violin world. A virtuoso disciple of Henri Vieuxtemps, he was also, it turns out, the composer of eight operas. Among them was *Anna Karenina*, based on Tolstoy's novel and first seen in Budapest in 1923. Its staging at the KONZERT THEATER BERN (December 27) was apparently only the second since the end of World War II, the other being in Braunschweig nearly four years ago (May 2014, pp. 594-5). Rather than the original Hungarian text, a German translation (made by a Viennese critic soon after the premiere) was used; unfortunately it was somewhat prosaic, and on several occasions the sound of the words seemed not to match the colour of the music.

The score is idiosyncratic, almost operetta-like in the scenes with Kitty and Levin, but more substantial where Anna herself is involved—her scenes are impressively intense and richly conceived. Elsewhere, Hubay too often indulges a penchant for catchy waltzes (despite its date of composition, these are more Johann than Richard Strauss) or for folksiness, typified by the rather corny use of a balalaika to evoke the Russian soul. The orchestration can be colourful, especially in the final scene, but there is a heavy reliance on certain solo instruments—the violin predictably among them—and on the percussion section, which calls for five players. At times it lacks sophistication.

■ Hubay's 'Anna Karenina' in Bern, with Zurab Zurabishvili and Magdalena Anna Hofmann as Wronsky and Anna



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