

her boyfriend Fenton are into the punk scene and enjoy speaking in Shakespearean quotations. Her two rejected suitors, Dr Cajus and Junker Spärlich, eventually find happiness with each other. All this is told with that sledgehammer sort of humour stereotypically attributed to Germany. Praise is due to the unusually game cast for (just) pulling it off. It was a starry cast, too, with René Pape pouring his dark-hued voice unstintingly into a convincing characterization of the Fat Knight. Falstaff's ditty 'Als Büblein klein an der Mutter Brust', once a recital staple, showed off his ample register, and he struck sparks off the fabulous Michael Volle (Herr Fluth) in their duo. Mandy Fredrich and Michaela Schuster were similarly well paired as the twin title characters, the latter's smoky timbre in maximum contrast to the former's clear coloratura. Anna Prohaska was scintillating in Anna's aria, while Pavol Breslik lent some melting sounds to Fenton's Shakespearean paraphrase, 'Horch, die Lerche singt im Hain'. Daniel Barenboim, conducting Nicolai's opera for the first time, led the Staatskapelle in a sophisticated reading of a score it premiered, under the composer's guidance, back in 1849.

On October 13 the KOMISCHE OPER presented *The Bassarids* as the season's first new production, the company's Intendant Barrie Kosky joining forces again with the conductor Vladimir Jurowski for another 20th-century masterpiece to follow their 2015 *Moses und Aron*. Henze's opera was given in a version that reinserted the discarded Intermezzo into the revised body of the piece, making for almost two and a half continuous hours. Even in Henze's reduced instrumentation, the orchestra spilled into the auditorium and onto the stage (the piece was originally conceived for Salzburg's huge Festspielhaus), leaving only centre stage free for the performers. This proved to be enough for Kosky's intimate *Personenregie*, with its concentration on individual characters, ideally complemented by the chorus and an ensemble of dancers choreographed by Kosky's usual partner, Otto Pichler. The cast featured several veterans from last year's Salzburg performances. Sean Panikkar brought great intensity to an always lyrical portrayal of Dionysus, while Tanja Ariane Baumgartner was devastatingly intense as Agave. Vera-Lotte Boecker, a member of the Komische Oper's ensemble, repeated her Salzburg portrayal of Autonoe. Günter Papendell realized fully Pentheus's tragic potential, with his ensemble colleagues Jens Larsen, Ivan Turšić, Tom Erik Lie and Margarita Nekrasova completing the cast. The Komische Oper chorus, reinforced by the Vocalconsort Berlin, deserves special mention for their unqualified engagement. Presiding over these enormous forces, Jurowski conducted with aplomb, laying out the score's contrasting planes with the greatest clarity. One left the theatre feeling as exhausted as the interpreters, but equally satisfied. CARLOS MARÍA SOLARE

## Frankfurt

OPER FRANKFURT's diverse and abundant repertory continues to astonish. At the beginning of November I was able to see the company's three newest productions — *Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk*, *Manon Lescaut*, *Tamergano* — over a period of five days. It's a tribute to the Intendant, Bernd Loebe, that he can offer such variety within the context of an ensemble theatre, even more so that all three productions enjoyed headline stars — Anja Kampe in the Shostakovich, Asmik Grigorian in the Puccini, Lawrence Zazzo in the Handel — supported by the resident singers and conductors.

Frankfurt's music director, Sebastian Weigle, widely regarded as a German specialist, chose to take charge of Anselm Weber's staging of *Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk* (seen on



■ Dmitri Belosselsky as Boris and Anja Kampe as Katerina Ismailova in Frankfurt

November 7) which fielded a trio of guests in the principal roles — Dmitry Golovnin as Sergey and Dmitri Belosselskiy as Boris, alongside Kampe — and Evgeny Akimov as Katerina's weak husband, Zinovy, with the smaller parts well cast from the ensemble. Weber is the Intendant of Frankfurt's neighbouring Schauspielhaus and a regular, if infrequent, invitee at the opera. His stagings are strong on core theatrical values, integrating big-name performers into a team; here he created sufficient atmosphere to make Shostakovich's black comic tragedy a vivid, ultimately moving drama, even if his production, simply designed by Kasper Glaner, lacked those 'wow' moments that distinguished the finest productions I have seen (David Pountney at ENO, Graham Vick in Birmingham, Krzysztof Warlikowski in Paris). Thanks to the quality of the acting and singing, Shostakovich was well-served, but Weber's handling of the scene in the police station — the officers, not inappropriately perhaps, looked like members of a criminal gang with their dark glasses and leather gear — didn't etch itself into the memory as some have done. On the other hand, his faultless *Personenregie* made the inter-character relationships absolutely clear (not something you can always rely on in Germany). Kampe's Katerina could possibly have benefited from a sexier Sergey than Golovnin, who looked middle-aged and insufficiently beefcakey for the part and sang with a dryish tenor more suited perhaps to Russian character roles such as Shuisky and Agrippa/Mephisto in *The Fiery Angel*. The soprano's tireless vocal performance and histrionic dedication matched her achievement in Kupfer's more compelling Munich production. It is excellent news that she is soon to add Janáček's *Kostelnička* to her repertoire; Emilia Marty would be another ideal role for such a vivid singing actor. Belosselskiy's drunken, rapacious and hypocritical Boris, superbly sung, was another of the production's assets, as were the noticeable performances of Peter Marsh (Drunken Peasant), Zanda Švėde (Sonyetka) and Alfred Reiter (the Priest, who dresses in Katerina's underwear in a cage that descends from the flies above the main action). Weigle's conducting of the versatile Oper-und-Museumsorchester and the singing of the chorus made strong impressions.

1/3



■ Iurii Samoilov as Lescaut and Asmik Grigorian as Manon at Oper Frankfurt

Frankfurt was most fortunate in securing the Lithuanian soprano Asmik Grigorian for her role debut in *Manon Lescaut*, her second appearance here (after the title role in *Iolanta*) since her sensational bow as Salome at the 2018 Salzburg Festival. Since then she has become one of opera's hottest properties, another singer-actor of special gifts who brings unique histrionic and vocal qualities to a bewildering variety of parts. This was my first encounter with her in the flesh, and it confirmed the singer's star quality as seen on the DVD of the Salzburg *Salome*. It was instructive to see her in Puccini's very different role. The voice is certainly not huge, although that is hardly a prerequisite for Puccini's anti-heroine, but its keen focus, allied with exceptional acting ability—she simply *was* the teenage Manon with her blonde pony-tail and contemporary clothes and accessories (Luc Castells)—made her memorable in the role. Her slight frame belies a substantial lyric voice with dramatic-soprano potential. Manon Lescaut may be a more demanding part than, say, Mimì—or even, arguably, Tosca—but Grigorian paced herself with the assurance of a seasoned pro, delivering stylistically scrupulous accounts of 'In quelle trine morbide' and 'Sola, perduta, abbandonata', yet saving her biggest guns for the Act 2 duet with Des Grieux, 'Tu, tu, amore, tu'. Her performance here made me long to see her three *Trittico* heroines, her Butterfly and, eventually, her Tosca.

Reports of the first night—I saw the penultimate performance on November 9—suggested that her tenor, Joshua Guerrero, was at least as exciting as Grigorian, but late in the run his lyric voice sounded stretched to its limits in Act 3, beyond them in Act 4, suggesting that he had bitten off more than he could chew. His two Act 1 solos sounded promising, certainly, but 'No, pazzo son' was audibly a challenge for him on this occasion. As Lescaut, the young Russian 'barihunk' Iurii Samoilov was easy on the eye but vocally overparted. Donato Di Stefano's Geronte was at least characterful as the old roué, portrayed by the director, Alex Ollé, as the proprietor of a pole-dancing joint in yet another generic Fura-dels-Baus update which relocated the action to more or less contemporary America. It just about worked but transferring operas of this type with a

Opera, January 2020

morally flawed heroine into yet another indictment of the modern world's sex industry has become something of a cliché. Alfons Flores's unitary set—dominated by the word Love in huge capital letters—really came into its own only in the last act as it slowly revolved, with Grigorian's Manon alone, lost and abandoned at its centre. The surprise of the evening was the conductor, Takeshi Moriuchi, sharing the run with Lorenzo Viotti and demonstrating a firm grasp of Puccini's idiom. He coaxed superb playing from the orchestra.

I wish I could summon more enthusiasm for R.B. Schlather's staging of Handel's *Tamerlano* in Oper Frankfurt's studio space, the BOCKENHEIMER DEPOT (a former tram shed). The designer Paul Steinberg (well known in the UK for his work with the Alden twins) had transformed the space with bleached walls and a Guantanamo-esque cage for the onstage orchestra, to create an impression for the audience of being in a prison camp. Fair enough, but at times the musical performance rendered Handel's masterpiece into more of a slow-torture chamber. Karsten Januschke—a former house all-rounder, but on this evidence nowhere near a Handelian—conducted the orchestra using period instruments in a style that would have seemed old-fashioned 30 years ago, the slow numbers lugubriously paced, the fast ones taken at a *presto impossibile* which taxed even the most experienced Handel singer here, Zazzo, in the title role. He played the Mongol tyrant as a cheesy modern American politician, greeting the audience with fake grins and triumphal gestures while wearing a hairpiece and false moustache. Not a Trump lookalike but very much in that mould. He was the most charismatic singer on stage, but even he was forced into vocal vulgarity by the declamatory style encouraged by either the director or the conductor. Yves Saelens's ranting Bajazet was more gravely affected in a grotesquely exaggerated performance which might have suited an expressionistic role such as the Captain in *Wozzeck*, but robbed the Ottoman emperor of all dignity here. I fear the director—whose work in America includes several Handel operas—may have seen too many Peter Sellars productions for his own good: Andronico—the sweet- if small-voiced Brennan Hall—was dressed as a padded American footballer, while Irene (Cecelia Hall, no relation) strutted her stuff in a blonde wig and tarty silver lamé trouser suit. At least she sang the lovely aria 'Par che mi nasca in seno', with chalumeaux obbligato, affectingly. But in general, none of the supporting singers, including Elizabeth Reiter's intermittently limpid Asteria, seemed particularly at home with Handel's style. The performance was slightly cut, but still lasted what seemed an interminable three and a half hours, so the inclusion of Leone's virtuoso aria purloined from *Riccardo Primo* for a later revival seemed more than usually superfluous, especially when it was only adequately sung by Liviu Holender.

Whether by coincidence or design, Oper Frankfurt's 2019-20 season has a look of 'Pesaro am Main' with no fewer than three new productions of rareish works by Rossini. *Otello* was the opening production (I caught the performance on September 21), followed by the even less frequently programmed *La gazzezza*—like *Otello*, written for Naples, but not the Teatro San Carlo, which had burnt down—and *Bianca e Faliero*, a *melodramma* premiered at La Scala in 1819.

Damiano Michieletto's modern-dress production (with costumes by Carla Teti in smart, contemporary sets by his regular collaborator, Paolo Fantin) was first seen at the Theater an der Wien in 2016. It is one of the Italian *enfant terrible*'s more engaging productions, transporting Francesco Berio di Salsa's libretto—a long way 'after Shakespeare'—to the recent past with *Otello* refashioned as a Middle Eastern (though Western-dressed) businessman, welcomed by the money-grabbing, duplicitous 'Venetian'

2/3





■ Rossini's 'Otello' in Frankfurt, with (in foreground) Nino Machaidze as Desdemona and Enea Scala in the title role

politicians. Desdemona is a pawn in the mercantile dealings of Elmiro Barberigo (Shakespeare's Aegeus) and the political machinations of the Doge, whose son, Roderigo, aspires to her hand.

As such—for a Brit who knows Shakespeare's play—it was an entirely plausible dislocation into an identifiable world of political-economical wheeler-dealing with lavish receptions and the inevitable betrayal of the Middle Eastern incomer. I have rarely found the narrative more immediate and engaging; and even if,

musically, the performance was hardly an evening of bel canto nirvana, for a German repertoire house it was remarkably good. Frankfurt's Intendant Bernd Loebe has always been a voice connoisseur and a resourceful caster of singers: here, Enea Scala (always an incisive deliverer of text) revealed a baritenor of arresting quality, well up to the technical demands of a role written for the reportedly dark-voiced Andrea Nozzari, while Jack Swanson's handsome, more lyrical Roderigo made an entirely plausible love rival. The third tenor was the Frankfurt ensemble member Theo Lebow, a brooding presence; but the cuts sanctioned by the conductor Sesto Quatrini (or insisted on by Michieletto) reduced his role to little more than a villainous cipher. The short-notice indisposition of the Polish soprano Karolina Makuła brought the Georgian soprano Nino Machaidze back to the part she had sung in Vienna. This is a voice I haven't warmed to in the past, but most of her singing was of sufficient quality to leave me nicely surprised. She is a touching actress. The smaller parts were well taken by other company members: Thomas Faulkner as a stern, uncaring Elmiro, Hans-Jürgen Lazar as the dodgy and doddering Doge (in a wheelchair) and the enchanting Kelsey Lauritano (a member of the Opernstudio) as a ditty Emilia (here reimagined by the director as Desdemona's flighty, flirtatious younger sister). Quatrini conducted a stylish, often exhilarating account of the slightly abridged score, always underpinning the gripping drama of Michieletto's staging.

HUGH CANNING

## Ireland

### Dublin

For its autumn tour around Ireland IRISH NATIONAL OPERA took the adventurous decision to present Vivaldi's *Griselda* (seen on October 12)—surprisingly, the first performance ever of a Vivaldi opera in Ireland. The company's artistic director Fergus Sheil assembled a fine team. The conductor Peter Whelan drew a splendid performance from the virtuoso Irish Baroque Orchestra and the six singers. The director Tom Creed transferred the action to a modern state, showing how universal the plot is—dictators and their sins remain the same over the centuries. It was an imaginative and highly

successful concept. The king/dictator, Gualtiero, is faced with a revolt; he believes the problem is the public's dislike of his low-born queen Griselda and decides to divorce her in favour of the more aristocratic Costanza, who is in love with Roberto and is an unwilling choice. After much intriguing all ends well, Griselda is restored to the throne and Costanza and Roberto are married. The designer Katie Davenport created a very effective palace setting, heavily surveyed by many CCTV cameras under the supervision of a courtier, Ottone, who is in love with Griselda.

The Cardiff Singer of the World audience prize-winner Katie Bray created a splendid *Griselda*, singing the tricky music with great aplomb. The Spanish tenor Jorge Navarro Colorado was an imposing dictator, using his great height to regal effect, helped by a marvellously flashy gold suit. Emma Morwood provided a richly-toned Costanza, while the countertenor Russell Harcourt was a fine, lovelorn Roberto. Sinéad O'Kelly handled the challenging role of Ottone, a woman in this production, with exemplary dramatic skill and Raphaela Mangan depicted a conspiring palace secretary very well. The singing and acting were excellent throughout, so that the production was both a musical and a dramatic delight.

IAN FOX

## Wexford

Last things first. This was David Agler's 15th and final season as the artistic director of the WEXFORD FESTIVAL OPERA. Since it was also my golden anniversary at this friendliest and merriest of festivals, having attended since 1969, I may be in a position to judge that, if not the best director (that would be invidious), there has been none better. Brian Dickie's tenure was auspicious during my own first years, and Elaine Padmore's time was memorable, but Agler's decade and a half, embracing the opening of the fine new National Opera House, as it now is, has seen a number of brilliant successes (and only a few real horrors).

■ Goderdzi Janelidze and Olafur Sigurdarson in 'Don Quichotte' in Wexford



3/3