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Wexford Festival Opera, Ireland



By Andrew Clark

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Every artistic decision is a financial decision, and every financial decision an artistic one. The words came from Wexford's artistic director, David Agler, during a discussion on Monday of his opera festival's precarious prospects, but they could just as well have been uttered by any other recession-hit impresario. The job of artists is to dream dreams – and then to find the resources to realise them. When cutbacks kick in, it's money managers who call the tune, and the first casualty is artistic experiment.

Wexford, an Irish fishing town that hosts one of the opera world's niche events, is in the thick of this dilemma. For 59 years it has staked its reputation on reviving forgotten works that no metropolitan company would risk putting on. Three years ago, buoyed by swelling international popularity and its status as a beacon for Irish culture, it opened a new theatre, with 40 per cent more seats. It now faces an implosion of public finances at home and a worldwide recession that could stem the flow of foreign visitors, who make up more than a third of its audience.

The enlarged theatre implied a bigger orchestra and chorus, a more opulent style of staging and a more spectacular type of repertoire than tiny Wexford was accustomed to. This is now being questioned. Although the festival has increased private funding, recently adding insurance group Zurich to its list of business sponsors, the financial chill is affecting income: the first three nights, traditionally a hot ticket, failed to sell out this year.

That is no reflection on Agler's choice of repertoire, but it does lay bare the festival's competitive pressures. In recent years the opera world has become more curious about its forgotten past: look at the Royal Opera's success last month with *Niobe*, by a baroque composer (Agostino Steffani) most aficionados had never heard of. Wexford is no longer a lone champion of the obscure.



Pumeza Matshikiza is Vendulka in 'Hubicka'

Its identity may be further diluted by co-productions, forced on it by economic necessity. Two of this year's shows have a link with Opera Theatre of Saint Louis. In the case of Peter Ash's *The Golden Ticket*, a children's opera premiered by the US company in June, Wexford has saddled itself with a sugar-sweet aesthetic that sits ill with its reputation as a connoisseur's haven.

As for Smetana's *Hubicka* (The Kiss), the festival is repeating an opera it first staged in the 1980s – a choice reflecting the needs of its American partner (which will perform it in 2012), rather than its own. These are financially driven decisions, with knock-on artistic effects. Agler says co-productions with European companies are now being considered.

Saint Louis may profit most from the current deal, for *Hubicka* is the runaway success of the 2010 festival (which began on Saturday and continues until October 30). A light comedy with tinges of sadness typical of late 19th-century Bohemian music, it is one of the most tuneful operas in the Czech repertoire, providing a well-earned showcase for the festival orchestra under Jaroslav Kyzlink. Michael Gieleta's simple, subtle staging, designed by James MacNamara and Fabio Toblini, matches the music's charm, mildly updating the story and caricaturing its quaint aspects while preserving the naive village atmosphere.

Vendulka, the girl whose refusal to accept a kiss from the man she loves fuels the plot, is sung by South African soprano Pumeza Matshikiza, an open-hearted singer full of promise but still in need of technical refinement, who deservedly won the audience's heart. As Lukas, Slovak tenor Peter Berger produced a stream of authentic Slavonic sound, and there were scene-stealing cameos from Ekaterina Bakanova, Jiri Pribyl and Bradley Smoak.

Wexford has long been famous for "discovering" talented singers who go on to make big careers, and it has struck gold with Angela Meade in *Virginia*, the fifth of Mercadante's operas to be featured at the festival. A lirico-spinto soprano with a bulging list of engagements in her native US, Meade has a graceful presence, a disarming smile and a handsome voice – as commanding at the top as it is secure in Mercadante's decorative flights.

Like most of Wexford's *bel canto* revivals, *Virginia* makes a worthy, if unexceptional, evening's entertainment. Its aria-and-cabaletta style was already out of date by the time of its first performance in 1866. The plot, a formulaic patricians-versus-plebeians tussle with pivotal love interest, came across with no compensating depth in Kevin Newbury's staging, designed by Allen Moyer, which made an unsuccessful attempt to blur the lines between ancient Rome and modern kitchen sink. But Wexford's performance boasted a lively conductor in Carlos Izcaray and a pair of lusty tenors in Ivan Magrì and Bruno Ribeiro.

The Golden Ticket, a sickeningly cutesy adaptation of Roald Dahl's 1964 children's story *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*, has enough lowbrow appeal to guarantee it a life, but it's hard to see how a work of such musical triviality can do anything but tarnish Wexford's reputation. The score is blandly illustrative – when it is not mimicking Bernstein, Janáček, Ravel and others. There's no shortage of witty lines, especially those of Augustus Gloop as he falls into the chocolate river, but Donald Sturrock's libretto is otherwise short on sophistication and poetry.

James Robinson's slick staging, conducted by Timothy Redmond, creates a colourful platform for Wayne Tigges' Willy Wonka and Michael Kepler Meo's Charlie, both of whom do a professional job. What *The Golden Ticket* really needs, though, is a one-way ticket back to the US.

Agler, a mild-mannered Canadian now in his sixth year as artistic director, says his wish list includes rarities by Delius, Ponchielli, Vaughan Williams and Malcolm Williamson, all of which could bolster Wexford's niche in the festival market.

Whether his wishes can be fulfilled depends on a precarious financial balancing act. Wexford may have dilemmas peculiar to itself, but in most respects it is a microcosm of the opera world at large. www.wexfordopera.com

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