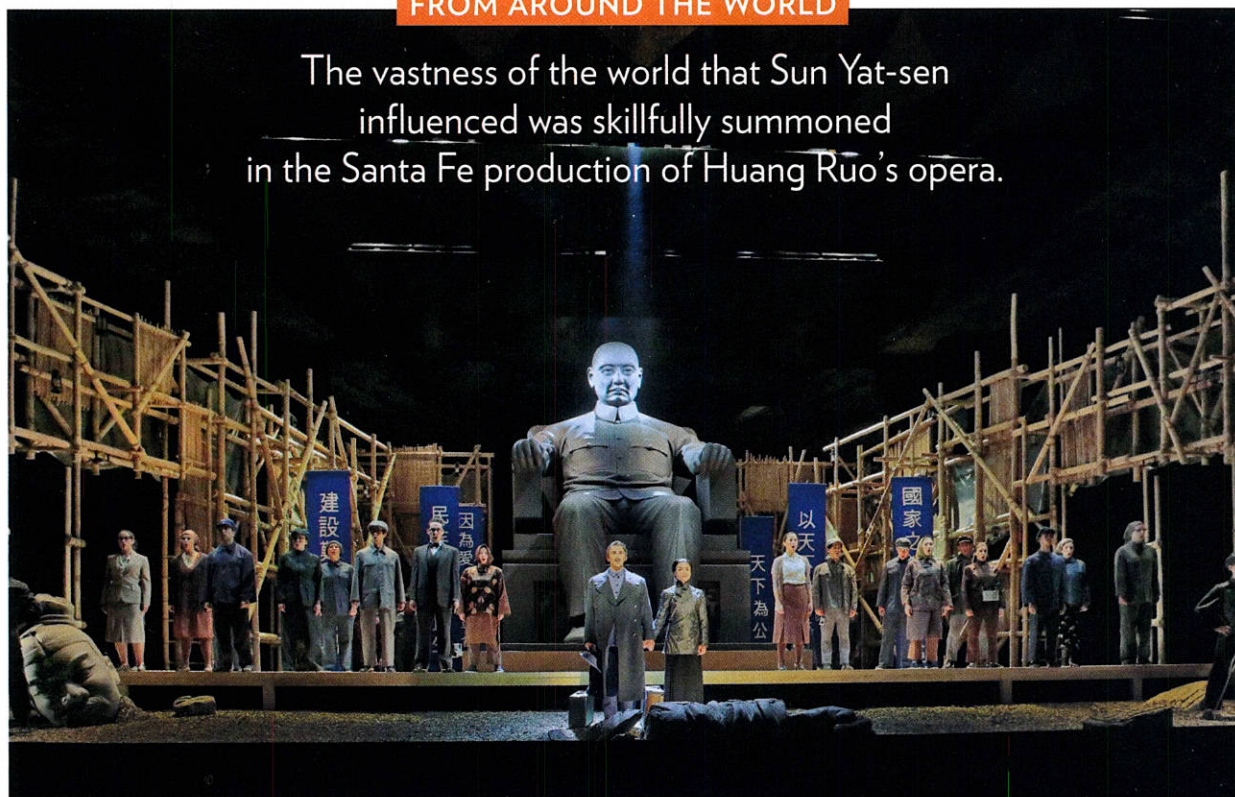


IN REVIEW

FROM AROUND THE WORLD

The vastness of the world that Sun Yat-sen influenced was skillfully summoned in the Santa Fe production of Huang Ruo's opera.



NORTH AMERICA

SANTA FE, NM

The new work for the season in Santa Fe, Huang Ruo's *Dr. Sun Yat-sen*, was first produced in Hong Kong in 2011, but according to a program note, the score was now so different from the original that the Santa Fe performance could rank as a world premiere. The opera is based on the life of the Chinese leader Sun Yat-sen, a key figure in the overthrow of the corrupt Qing dynasty, the provisional president of the young Republic of China and, until his death in 1925, its effective leader. The action, however, centers on the private life of this important historic figure, and on his controversial second marriage to Soong Ching-ling, the daughter of one of his revolutionary associates. Although love and politics do not collide disastrously, in Verdian fashion, in this work, Sun Yat-sen's romantic life casts a humanizing light on his momentous public career.

The vastness of the world that Sun Yat-sen so decisively influenced was skillfully summoned within the confines

of the Santa Fe stage. Allen Moyer's set enclosed the stage with bamboo scaffolding, denoting a world in construction, while the personal drama was acted out on a long, raised platform. The formal, tableau style of James Robinson's production (seen July 30) called on the gestural language of East Asian theater. An eloquently expressive troupe of five dancers embodied the cruel hauteur of the Qing regime and, later, the labors of the people, while the chorus, both on the lower stage and in the scaffolding, constantly threatened chaos. But revolutionary turmoil was felt mainly through the orchestra. Huang's thrillingly clamorous and instantly accessible score, conducted with controlled vigor by Carolyn Kuan, combined Western and East Asian modes of music and instrumentation, literally articulating the battleground upon which the revolution was fought. Mountainous walls of percussion in the idiom of the Chinese theater made it sound as if the orchestra itself was embroiled in political and cultural



Dennis, Winters and chorus in Santa Fe Opera's American premiere of *Dr. Sun Yat-sen*, top of page; Dennis and Winters, above

conflict; some of the moments in which Chinese instruments were used lyrically — as when the nostalgic string instrument, the goochin, accompanied Sun Yat-sen and Soong Ching-ling's declaration of love before their wedding — created a heartrending effect.

The Chinese dialect of Mandarin does not render the mellifluous flow of words familiar from European opera, so the dialogue, in the manner of Chinese opera, sounded methodically slow and, to Western ears, akin to plainsong chant. Joseph Dennis, a Santa Fe apprentice, bravely stood in as Sun Yat-sen for the

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originally announced Warren Mok, who withdrew from the production during rehearsals. Dennis's Sun Yat-sen was a figure of charismatic calmness. Central to the production was Corinne Winters, a potent, luminous performer, as Soong Ching-ling. Winters generated the energy that drove the production and became an iconic figure for the suffering caused by revolution. Charlie, Ching-ling's father, was sung with blustery good and ill humor by Dong-Jian Gong, and his wife, Ni Gui-zhen, was played with depth and sympathy by MaryAnn McCormick.

Unfortunately, the evening ended on a disturbing note. After Sun Yat-sen declared that all he had done was humbly serve the public, an immense statue of him rose at the back of the stage, and the chorus turned to praise it. This frankly Stalinist strategy undercut the liberal ideology that had prevailed throughout the evening by suggesting that government through hero-worship is best. It was an ending that betrayed what the opera is about.

This season, *Fidelio* found its way into the repertory of Santa Fe Opera for the first time. Stephen Wadsworth's production was modern — not because of its concentration-camp setting and its use of Nazi uniforms but because of the way in which evil was represented as a totally normal part of everyday life. Charlie Corcoran's set resembled the comfortable courtyard of a Bavarian inn more than a jail; Rocco and Jaquino gradually donned Nazi uniforms — garb that stands in our imagination for the ultimate in oppression — while Pizarro, the supreme opera villain, was obviously wracked by anxiety at his murderous impulses. This take on Beethoven's melodrama required a production that created a vivid sense of reality, something Wadsworth managed with notable success, creating a sharply etched world in which the evil of tyranny was felt with increasing pressure. Even at the end of the opera, we knew that oppression was not lifted; Rocco and Jaquino, those likeable fellows, were now to suffer the torments they had previously administered.

In the course of the performance (seen July 31), we became most familiar with

the characters of Jaquino (Joshua Dennis), Marzelline (Devon Guthrie) and Rocco (Manfred Hemm), whose ubiquitous presence onstage created the real-life atmosphere in which the hideous banality of evil was most directly felt. All three artists, especially the Austrian veteran Hemm, sang with an ease, fluency and lightness that complemented the singspiel origins of their characters.

The particular perspective of this production limited Alex Penda's capacity to convey fully the power of the heroic love that keeps evil constantly at bay. The diminutive soprano's Leonore was oddly childish, especially when she skipped around the stage as if being assigned to dungeon duty was a treat; vocally, she had more gravitas. Although she had vibrato problems at the start of "Abscheulicher," Penda tackled the aria's fearsome heights with supreme confidence, and her mezzo-ish timbre lent warmth and seriousness to the quartet. Paul Groves, who is steadily advancing

But he also has a firm sense of structure, first apparent here in the tightly played overture, then in the careful pacing of the score, which climaxed in final choruses of unusual power.

The company's new *Don Pasquale*, directed by Laurent Pelly and conducted by Corrado Rovaris, was a hit. Andrew Shore (Pasquale), Zachary Nelson (Malatesta) and Alek Shrader (Ernesto) are known quantities as comic actors, but at the July 29 performance, Brenda Rae — so impressive as the tragic Violetta in Pelly's *Traviata* revival last season — emerged as the production's comic center. Few coloratura sopranos could act as imaginatively drunk onstage or set up such a wicked rapport with the audience; we had to root for Rae's Norina in her assault upon the hapless Pasquale. Rae employed her formidable coloratura not just to display her voice but to create a volatile character who was viperish yet full of sex appeal. Shrader, as her doltish love, was the klutz supreme — slobbish, lazy,

childishly emotional, spineless and quite incapable of moving more than a few feet without banging into someone or tussling with the scenery. That anyone would love him was beyond belief, but despite it all, Norina did. At the end, this totally useless pair were united, and we were delighted.

Shore's Pasquale tried to retain some dignity, but he systematically failed, in the course of which he aroused gales of laughter. His Pasquale's sense of his own worth and his kindling desires for Norina were always rudely checked, but our growing sympathy for him leavened the laughter. There was no conciliatory ending here: at the end of the opera, this Pasquale stormed off in fury. Nelson's Malatesta scurried around the stage with demonic energy and cynical brio, bringing to the fore the stringent amorality of the situation. Shore and Nelson sang with remarkable nimbleness, managing the ferociously difficult patter duet, "Cheti,



Grimsley, Penda and Groves in *Fidelio* at Santa Fe Opera

from lyric to heldentenor territory, has probably not yet achieved his full heroic potential, but his Florestan fitted the milieu of the production well: he registered more as the common man than as a hero. The most striking performance was Greer Grimsley's powerfully voiced Pizarro, a vivid portrait of a corrupt leader who does not understand the line between private revenge and public duty.

With this *Fidelio*, maestro Harry Bicket led his first performance as Santa Fe's chief conductor. Bicket is a singers' conductor, who ensures that everyone onstage can be heard with total clarity.



Don Pasquale antics with Nelson, Rae, Shore and Shrader

cheti, immanente,” with perfect equanimity.

Pelly’s production was an absurdist feast. To demonstrate the chaos Norina brings to Pasquale’s household, the director literally turned the set upside down; to display her wastefulness, he filled the stage with useless objects, ugly chairs and gaudy bouquets. Chantal Thomas, his stage designer, aided and abetted him with wit and an uncanny ability to upset our sense of perspective and balance. At the end, one left the theater quite giddy.

Rovaris got the orchestra off to a slow, disjointed start, but by the end of the overture, everything was whipped into shape, and from there on the orchestra ripped into Donizetti’s score, playing the fast-paced music with exuberance and precision. One could only marvel at how the singers both acted and sang with such virtuosity; Shrader’s successful traversal of the tricky upper passages of “Mi fa il destino mendico” while struggling with four suitcases was a wonder.

Stephen Lawless’s unorthodox production of *Carmen* (seen July 28), set on the border between Mexico and the U.S., was driven by images of prison and oppression. Carmen’s companions smuggled aliens across the border and trafficked in children; the military was as corrupt as the smugglers. Romantic freedom was apparent only during interludes, when video footage of the local mountains was projected in the blank spaces of Benoit Dugardyn’s bleak set; otherwise, this *Carmen* was a claustrophobic hell of prison cells, sweatshops, tacky bars and chain-link fences.

Lawless is not the first director to draw attention to the grim environment of *Carmen* — the last Santa Fe production of Bizet’s opera, in 2006, was set in a deeply depressed Spain — but he is one of few to succeed in representing the fatal affair of Carmen and Don José as a product of this environment. Politically radical Carmens, who use sex mainly to pursue revolutionary ends, have become quite common onstage, but

the Gypsy of Ana María Martínez, who took on the title role for the second half of the run, was not only a political firebrand but a boiling vat of sexuality. There was a gripping, snarling heat in Martínez’s rangy soprano, which she used to express sensual joy and venomous contempt.

Roberto De Biasio did not portray Don José as clearly or completely as Martínez did Carmen, mainly for vocal reasons. The Sicilian tenor has an impressively burnished top, which sounded splendid at full volume, but

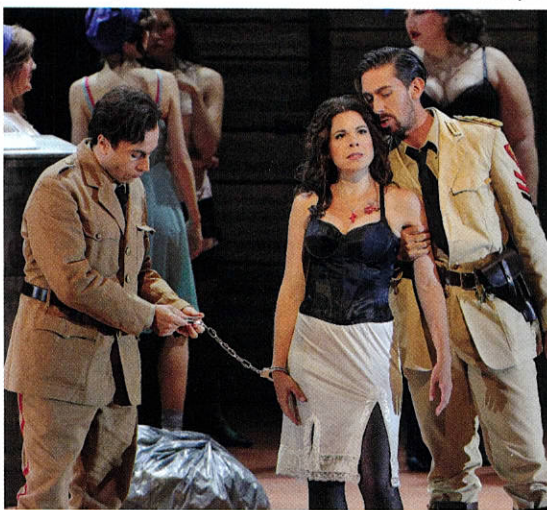
reached mighty heights of feral rage and despair.

The cast inhabited this dark *Carmen* with great vitality. Joyce El-Khoury was an unusually feisty Micaela, whose punchy singing suggested she is a Carmen-in-waiting. Kostas Smoriginas’s Escamillo was no paragon of masculinity but a second-rate showman; Dan Kempson and Noah Baetge were thoroughly scuzzy as Dancaire and Remendado, while Grant Neale provided a brilliant cameo of slimy villainy as Lillas Pastia. Conductor Rory Macdonald elicited playing and singing of HD clarity from both orchestra and chorus and discovered unexpected color and potency in the score’s few run-of-the-mill passages. Whether the video projections were necessary is a matter for debate; in this production they dulled the edge of what was otherwise a smart, compact and disquieting reading of Bizet’s masterpiece.

The prospect of Mozart’s *Impresario* and Stravinsky’s *Rossignol* in a double bill was intriguing; in performance it turned out to be delightful and enlightening. In its original version, Mozart’s *pièce d’occasion* probably has little to say to today’s audiences, but in Ranjit Bolt’s

exuberant and witty adaptation of the libretto, it took on unexpected theatrical life. In place of weary eighteenth-century impresarios and warring divas, we had a lively backstage tale of a Russian opera troupe in Paris during the 1920s, trying to revive its fortunes by staging *Le Rossignol*. This was followed by a performance of Stravinsky’s opera.

The production (seen Aug. 1) had the atmosphere of a party piece. For opera-goers there are probably few greater delights than seeing their idols let down their



Santa Fe’s *Carmen*, with De Biasio, Martínez and Evan Hughes (Zuniga)

lower down his voice lost definition, and whole phrases became inaudible. It was difficult to trace Don José’s psychological decline, which is crucial if we are to understand fully the character’s abandoned state. However, in the final scene De Biasio and Martínez — who can cut a truly imperious figure when needed —

hair and perform nonsense with the uninhibited energy of children. In the backstage drama, we witnessed the furious battle among three prima donnas — rather than two, as in Mozart’s original — as to who has the finest voice and is deserving of the largest fees. Adellina Vucedoro-Gambalunghi, sung by Erin

Morley, arguably won the competition with her hysterical coloratura; she was all the more moving when she subsequently reappeared as the Nightingale, raptly singing the most ethereal of melodies. The redoubtable and seemingly inexhaustible Brenda Rae, as the Romanian Vlada Vladimirescu, was everyone's worst nightmare of the egoistic diva, which only emphasized her solid, down-to-earth presence as the Cook in *Le*

framework for the riotously colorful and uplifting spectacle of *Le Rossignol* and became the screen for the decorative projections of Andrzej Goulding, which paralleled the transition in Stravinsky's score to complex modernistic modes with similar transitions in visual art. In the pit, conductor Kenneth Montgomery showed that he was equally conversant in the idioms of Mozart and Stravinsky.



The Impresario, with Burdette, Sledge, Michaels-Moore, Rae, Morley, Goversen and Arwady

Rossignol. Meredith Arwady's Chlotilda Krone auditioned outrageously with Don Giovanni's "Deh vieni alla finestra" and then appeared, weirdly, as a cubistic manifestation of Death. Anthony Michaels-Moore brought dignity to both Yuri Yussupovich, the Russian impresario, and the Emperor in *Le Rossignol*. Kevin Burdette sang with admirable certitude as Otto van der Puff and the Chamberlain. David Goversen, surely one of the tallest opera singers around, was hilarious as Heinrich Eiler, a financier, and moving as the Bonze. Bruce Sledge sang with appealing lyricism as Vlada's henpecked husband, then performed to glorious poetic effect as the Fisherman. The choreography of Seán Curran added wit and magic to the proceedings.

Michael Gieleta, a director new to Santa Fe, elicited perfect comic timing and exemplary spoken articulation from his performers. James Macnamara's dun set for *The Impresario* was deliberately rather dispiriting, but it provided the

One tiny caveat: the production should have been given without an intermission. The contrasts central to its appeal would then have been more pronounced. Nevertheless this was an occasion of rare delight — as was the entire season.

SIMON WILLIAMS

DENVER

For the second consecutive summer, Colorado's Central City Opera has taken one of its shows on the road — down the hill thirty-five miles to Denver. Last summer, CCO staged *Show Boat* in Denver's 3,000-seat Buell Theatre. This season, Central City Opera relocated to the slightly smaller Ellie Caulkins Opera House next door to the Buell, presenting seven late-season performances of *The Sound of Music*. Judging from the enthusiastic full house on opening night, August 2, this combination of a beloved work brimming with instantly recognizable tunes and presented in a venue convenient to the compa-

ny's Denver fan base proved irresistible to patrons. Adding to the appeal was an able cast of singers, all directed smoothly and unobtrusively by Ken Cazan (who had also guided the company's terrific *Dead Man Walking* up in Central City earlier in the summer). The directorial plan was clearly to stay out of the way and allow Rodgers's unforgettable score and Hammerstein's equally memorable lyrics to hold center stage. (CCO's staging included "I Have Confidence" and "Something Good," Rodgers's two subsequent additions to the original stage version.) Cazan inserted nothing daring or distracting, except for a jarringly enormous Nazi flag, lowered in front of the curtain during a lengthy scene change.

The impressive physical staging — borrowed from the 2012 production by New Jersey's Paper Mill Playhouse — functioned well on the vast stage of the Ellie, dominated by a handsome entryway to the von Trapp home, its exterior and interior sides rotated on a large turntable between scenes by a fully visible stage crew. A generic painted backdrop, along with a large, rocky outcropping rolled onstage in the opening and closing scenes, provided enough suggestions of the Austrian scenery.

Local operagoers have become familiar with the seemingly bottomless talent pool in the Colorado Children's Chorale, which provided the youthful talent for six of the seven von Trapp kids. (The eldest, Liesl, was handled smartly by the delightful up-and-comer Julie Tabash, who sang supporting roles in Central City's two other summer productions.) Lined up in no particular order, these terrific young people deserve special praise for their fine singing, charming acting and controlled doses of cute — Grant Bradow (Friedrich), Margaret Pilkington (Louisa), Grace Pouliot (Brigitta), Cooper Causey (Kurt), Kaylee Rooks (Marta) and Lucy Crile (Gretl).

English-born soprano Katherine Manley, whose stage credits are dominated by Baroque opera, looked quite at home as the attractive, rambunctious postulant Maria Rainer: it was easy to see how her young charges would be smitten with her charm and honesty. Manley handled each of Maria's many bouncy ditties