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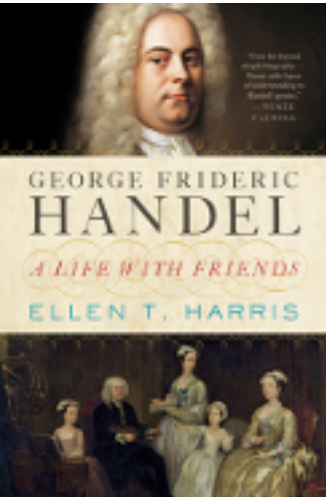
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RECENTLY IN PERFORMANCES

A Bright and Accomplished Cenerentola at Lyric Opera of Chicago
Gioachino Rossini’s *La Cenerentola* has returned to Lyric Opera of Chicago in a production new to this venue and one notable for several significant debuts along with roles taken by accomplished, familiar performers.

La Bohème, ENO
Back in 2000, Glyndebourne Touring Opera dragged Puccini’s sentimental tale of suffering bohemian artists into the ‘modern urban age’, when director David McVicar ditched the Parisian garrets and nineteenth-century frock coats in favour of a squalid bedsit in which Rodolfo and painter Marcello shared a line of cocaine under the grim glare of naked light bulbs and the clientele at *Café Momus* included a couple of gaudily attired transvestites.

Luigi Rossi: Orpheus
Just as Orpheus embarks on a quest for his beloved Eurydice, so the Royal Opera House seems to be in pursuit of the mythical music-maker himself: this year the house has presented Monteverdi’s *Orfeo* at the Camden Roundhouse (with the Early Opera Company in January), Gluck’s *Orphée et Eurydice* on the main stage (September), and, in the Linbury Studio Theatre, both Birtwistle’s *The Corridor* (June) and the Paris–music–hall style Little Lightbulb Theatre/Battersea Arts Centre co-production, *Orpheus* (September).

64th Wexford Festival Opera
Wexford Festival Opera has served up another thought-provoking and musically rewarding trio of opera rarities — neglected, forgotten or seldom performed — in 2015.

Christoph Prégardien, Schubert, Wigmore Hall London
Another highlight of the Wigmore Hall complete Schubert Song series – Christoph Prégardien and Christoph Schnackertz. The core Wigmore Hall Lieder audience were out in force. These days, though, there are young people among the regulars : a sign that appreciation of Lieder excellence is most certainly alive and well at the Wigmore Hall. .

The Magic Flute in San Francisco
How did it go? Reactions of my neighbors varied. Some left at the intermission, others remarked that they thought the singing was good.

La Vestale, La Monnaie, Bruxelles
In the first half of the 19th century, Spontini’s *La Vestale* was a hit. Empress Josephine sponsored its premiere, Parisians heard it hundreds of times, Berlioz raved about it and Wagner conducted it.

Shattering Madama Butterfly Stockholm
An intelligent updating and outstanding performance of the title role lead to a shattering climax in Puccini’s Japanese opera

Theodora, Théâtre des Champs-Élysées
Handel’s genius is central focus to the new staging of Handel’s oratorio *Theodora* at Paris’ Théâtre des Champs-Élysées.

Bostridge Sings Handel
1985 must have been a good year for founding a musical ensemble, or festival or organisation, which would have longevity.

Arizona Opera Premieres Kálmán’s Arizona Lady
Arizona Lady is the last operetta that Hungarian Jewish composer Emmerich Kálmán (1882–1953) wrote. A student at the Budapest

★
PERFORMANCES



31 Oct 2015

64th Wexford Festival Opera

Wexford Festival Opera has served up another thought-provoking and musically rewarding trio of opera rarities — neglected, forgotten or seldom performed — in 2015.

This year’s triptych, though, might have been titled, in the manner of Restoration tragedy, ‘*Love Thwarted* or, Irremediable Heartache’ (indeed, Dryden’s ‘*All for Love* or, the World Well Lost’ would have served well), such was the prevailing mood of the unalleviated romantic misery and morbidity. Fortunately, the music presented and the performances given were more than sufficient compensation for the emotional wretchedness and desolation enacted on stage.

Writing of Wexford’s 2012 production of Frederick Delius’s *A Village Romeo and Juliet*, I expressed my conviction that director Stephen Medcalf had ‘made a truly convincing case for the theatrical presentation of a work so often dismissed as six discrete “tone poems” which lack dramatic momentum and coherence’, concluding ‘I cannot imagine a more thoughtful and illuminating staging of this opera’.

Delius’s *Koanga* — the composer’s third opera (of six), which was first performed in 1904, three years before the premiere of *A Village Romeo and Juliet* — is perhaps a more difficult work to pull off. Artistic Director David Agler, speaking of his 11th Festival programme, commented that *Koanga* is ‘ground-breaking’ in its ‘use of African-American music and characters, the first of its kind’. However, while it’s certainly true that Delius’s employment of ‘local colour’ is pioneering, the composer’s sojourn on an orange plantation in Florida, where he arrived in March 1884, resulted in what Percy Grainger described as a somewhat ‘touristy’ appropriation of negro song which is not that different from Verdi’s suggestion of the ‘exotic’ in *Aida*; and, in this regard, *Koanga* is no less problematic than Scott Joplin’s *Treemonisha*, George Gershwin’s *Porgy and Bess*, Oscar Hammerstein’s *Carmen Jones*, and even Ernst Krenek’s *Johnny Spielt Auf*.

64th Wexford Festival Opera

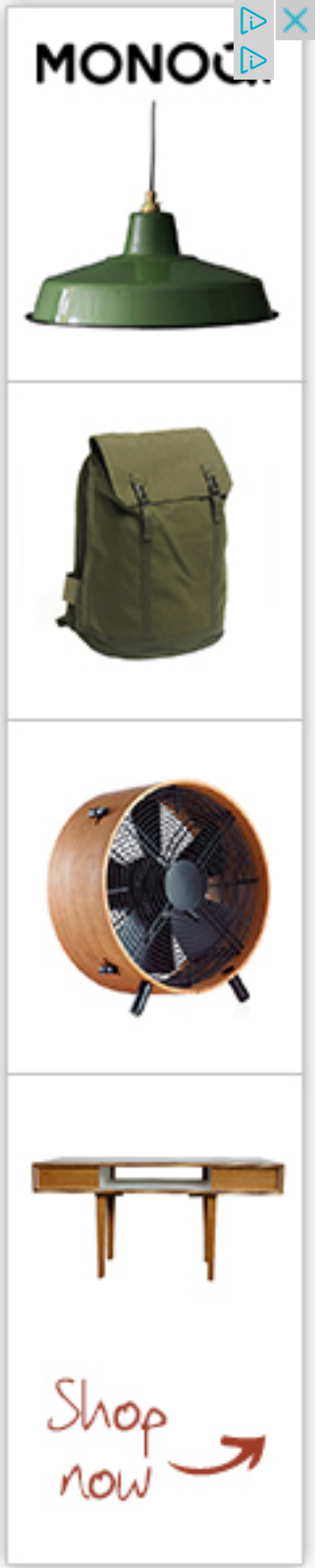
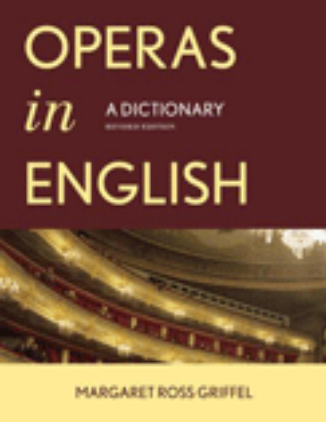
A review by Claire Seymour

Above: Mariangela Sicilia & Angelo Villari in *Guglielmo Ratcliff* by Mascagni

Photos by Clive Barda

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Academy of Music, he learned from the same teachers as Béla Bartók and Zoltán Kodály. After successfully staging an operetta in Budapest, Kálmán moved to Vienna.

The Met’s First Five Productions

The only thing that is at all radical or even noteworthy about the current Metropolitan Opera season is its imbalance: five Donizetti operas to one Wagner.

Missy Mazzoli’s *Song from the Uproar* at REDCAT

On October 8, 2015, Los Angeles Opera presented Missy Mazzoli and Royce Vavrek’s *Song from the Uproar: The Lives and Deaths of Isabelle Eberhardt* at REDCAT, the Roy and Edna Disney Cal Arts Theater in Walt Disney Concert Hall. The opera was part of L A O’s “Off Grand Program” which features chamber works in spaces smaller than the Dorothy Chandler Pavilion.

Loft Opera Presents an Evening of Excellent Ensembles, No Beer Required

Loft Opera has been hailed as the future of opera by multiple newspapers, magazines, and blogs across the nation, and even said to be “in the process of reinventing opera for the 21st Century” according to James Jorden from The New York Observer.

***The Tales of Hoffmann* — English Touring Orchestra**

Jacques Offenbach’s opéra fantastique, *The Tales of Hoffmann*, is a notoriously Protean beast: the composer’s death during rehearsals, four months before the premiere left the opera in an ‘non–definitive’ state which has since led to the acts being shuffled like cards, music being added, spoken dialogue and recitative vying for supremacy, the number of singers performing the principal roles varying, and even changes to the story itself — the latter being an amalgam of three tales by E.T.A. Hoffmann.

Bellini *I puritani* : gripping musical theatre

Vividly gripping drama is perhaps not phrase which you might expect to be used to refer to Bellini’s *I Puritani*, but that was the phrase which came into my mind after seen Annilese

Strong music values in 1940's setting for Handel's opera examining madness

As part of their Madness season, presenting three very contrasting music theatre treatments of madness (Handel’s Orlando, Bellini’s *I Puritani* and Sondheim’s Sweeney Todd) Welsh National Opera (WNO) presented Handel’s Orlando at the Wales Millennium Centre on Saturday 3 October 2015.

Bostridge, Isserlis, Drake, Wigmore Hall

Benjamin Britten met Mstislav Rostropovich in 1960, in London, where the cellist was performing Shostakovich’s First Cello Concerto. They were introduced by Shostakovich who had invited Britten to share his box at the Royal Festival Hall, for this concert given by the Leningrad Symphony Orchestra. Britten’s biographer, Humphrey Carpenter reports that a few days before Britten had listened to Rostropovich on the radio and remarked that he ““thought this the most extraordinary ‘cello playing I’d ever heard””.

***Falstaff* at Forest Lawn**

Sir John Falstaff appears in three plays by William Shakespeare: the two Henry IV plays and *The Merry Wives of Windsor*.

Music and Drama Interwoven in Chicago Lyric’s new *Le nozze di Figaro*

The opening performance of the 2015–2016 season at Lyric Opera of Chicago was the premiere of a new production of Mozart’s *Le nozze di Figaro* under the direction of Barbara Gaines and featuring the American debut of conductor Henrik Nánási.



Felix Kemp and Norman Garrett in *Koanga* by Frederick Delius

Koanga ’s libretto is based upon a story, ‘Bras-Coupé’, which Delius found within George Washington Cable’s novel, *The Grandissimes*. Prepared by the young novelist and Cambridge graduate, Charles Francis Keary, but substantially revised by Delius subsequently, it is a highly coloured pot-boiler, depicting Louisianan Creole society at the beginning of the 19th century. ‘Koanga’, the hero’s name, means, in the Congo language, ‘arm’; the African voodoo prince-protagonist has been sold into slavery and thus cut off from his tribe, his ‘strong arm’. Set to work for the plantation-owner, Don José Martinez, Koanga falls in love with the mulatto Palmyra — the undisclosed half-sister of Martinez’ wife, Clotilda. Palmyra, who is desired by the plantation overlord Simon Perez, is a Delilah-esque figure, offered by her Spanish masters to the newly arrived Koanga in order to make him submissive and biddable. But, the jealous Perez drags her away during the subsequent wedding ceremony and Koanga attacks Martinez, before fleeing to the forest where he exercises a voodoo spell which brings disease and disaster to the plantation.

A bloody end is inevitable: Koanga returns armed with a spear and strikes Perez as the latter attempts to force himself upon Palmyra; the voodoo prince is then caught by the whites and whipped, dying with a wish for his homeland and a curse upon his oppressors. Palmyra, too, yields to death. Delius framed the tale with a Prologue and Epilogue in which, one springtime evening, a group of daughters of the next generation of plantation owners ask the exuberant ‘Uncle Joe’ to tell them one of his stories of slavery and the desire for freedom. He begins with the tragic tale of Koanga and Palmyra, and as dusk falls the tale becomes reality before our eyes.

As with *A Village Romeo and Juliet*, the external action of *Koanga* is minimal; but Delius’s presentation of *Koanga*’s powerful emotional events — the conflicts, passions and dreams — seems to me less sure than in the later opera; the whites are depicted as unspeakable tormentors, while the blacks seem helpless despite their voodoo powers. And, there are some structural problems, especially at the end of Act 2. The main interest in *Koanga* is provided by the ‘negro’ choruses and ensemble dances, complete with banjo accompaniments, and the exciting contrasts created between the central melodrama and the creole colourings and voodoo ceremonies.

In this production (seen on 24 October), director Michael Gieleta and designer James Macnamara efficiently summon the milieu and customs, placing the action within a white ‘cube’ and making imaginative use of light, projections (projection design, Seán O’Riordan) and movement (choreography, Boyzie Cekwana) to match Delius’s musical mood-painting: the well-known ‘La Calinda’, danced by Palmyra at the abortive wedding ceremony, is persuasive, and the fleeing negroes’ sacrificial dance is terrifically mysterious and mystical.



Cast of *Le Pré aux clercs* by Hérolf

There is both naturalism and evocation. The mosaic of blue beads and shells which frames Koanga's entrance are a powerful intimation of the freedom and freshness denied to the slaves; as the ceiling lowers we witness the claustrophobic drudgery of their oppressed existence. Through small doors we glimpse the verdant richness of the plantation, while above hang a pendant moon and sun, sparkling and burnished respectively, spinning like voodoo charms. An elevated platform extends and retracts, raising Martinez and Perez to a dominant height; a wall panel similarly slides across the stage to create an interior where Clotilda pleads with Perez to help her prevent the marriage of Koanga and Palmyra, just as we see the lovers' passion grow. Overall, the simplicity of the sets, which are vibrantly illuminated by Lighting Designer Ian Sommerville, helps to focus attention on the central drama, and the story is clearly told. In particular, the Wexford Festival Chorus were on tremendous form; and, as if to underline the 'collective', and political, nature of the experiences presented, the Chorus took their places before the evening's rendition of the Irish National Anthem, joining heartily in the 'Amhrán na bhFiann' before the Prologue commenced.

Yet, while Delius brings off the set pieces with choral and orchestral aplomb, the love affair of Koanga and Palmyra feels overly rushed and impassioned: despite the *Tristan*-esque harmonic progressions, there is simply not enough yearning. In the title role, American baritone Norman Garrett was noble and dignified: I was reminded of the self-composure and honourable integrity of the African slave-prince depicted in Aphra Behn's travelogue-novella, *Oroonoko*. Vocally, though, Garrett was insufficiently imposing; the sound was refined, the phrasing gracious, but — in the first two Acts, at least — he seemed underpowered and therefore lacked dramatic authority. However, Garrett did cope well with the demanding tessitura, and while he did not stand out in the ensembles (Delius doesn't help, scoring them thickly and failing, as in the Act 1 quintet, to sufficiently individualise the over-lapping voices), in Act 3 Koanga's unbreakable spirit came through: Garrett's blood-drenched curse, swathed in a crimson light which foreshadows the fire which will sweep through the plantations, was fittingly awe-inspiring.

As the feisty mulatto slave girl, South African soprano Nozuko Teto was more luxurious of voice and her full tone was deeply expressive; her glossy lyricism and superb diction made an immediate impact drawing us into Palmyra's plight. This was a well-judged portrayal, both vibrant and touching.

American tenor Jeff Gwaltney successfully negotiated the often low-lying melodies of the odious Perez — but neither he, nor baritone Christopher Robertson, a rather underwhelming Martinez, could inject much genuine menace into Delius's somewhat two-dimensional characterisation. As Clotilda, Irish mezzo-soprano Kate Allen was a stronger dramatic presence, singing with sustained lustre. American bass-baritone Aubrey Allicock was engaging in the minor roles of Uncle Joe and the voodoo priest Rangwan.

If the opera's 'local colour' generally prevails over tenderness and dreamy melancholy, the brief Epilogue does provide a more lyrical conclusion; as the orchestra transports us back to the present, Delius's beautiful string lines convey with nostalgia and pensiveness the tragic losses we have witnessed (though the final vignette, as one of the plantation owners' daughters gave her younger sibling a hug, was a bit cloying). Conducted by Stephen Barlow, who convincingly swept the drama along, the Wexford Festival Orchestra found a rich resonance and unwavering beauty of tone, creating an authentic and

moving Delian eloquence. Ultimately, I wasn't entirely persuaded that through *Koanga's* amalgam of Wagner, Tchaikovsky, Verdi and negro-spiritual Delius is able to speak with a truly individual voice. Interesting, in this year's Tom Walsh Lecture, Barlow had noted that in recent times opera directors have focused more on the visual or ritual qualities of opera, neglecting narrative; that they have often engaged with a particular 'feature' of an opera, rather than with the essence of the opera itself. In this production, however, Gielata and Barlow undoubtedly captured the composer's strong sense of the dramatic as well as its colouristic effects; the result is an immensely arresting production.



[Aubrey Allcock & cast of *Koanga* by Delius](#)

Infatuation, passion and bloody violence also took centre-stage in Pietro Mascagni's *Guglielmo Ratcliff* (seen on 25 October). The infatuation is as much the composer's as his protagonists'; for the opera was the result of the adolescent Mascagni's obsessive fascination with Heinrich Heine's 1821 verse-drama of the same title: an excessively bloody foray into the grimness and ghastliness of the world of Scottish Gothic. Worthy of the most over-blown novel by Sir Walter Scott (and with more than a few similarities to Donizetti's *Lucia di Lammermoor*), the drama tells of the fanatical, compulsive, and ultimately death-doomed, desires of the offspring of ghostly lovers.

Heine is said to have written his 'dramatic ballad' in just three days, but Mascagni's four-act opera had a longer gestation. Conceived in 1884 and finally realised in 1895, at La Scala, the opera sets almost the entire text of an Italian translation of Heine's verse; but, paradoxically, all the important events (with the exception of the climactic duel) have either already happened before the drama begins or occur off-stage — and so, in the absence of significant 'action', the score works itself up into an unalleviated *verismo* frenzy while large chunks of back-story are related. The whole of the first Act is given over to narrative; even the heavy, symphonic *Prelude* is interrupted for a brief family history, given by Maria's nurse, Margherita. Essentially, the opera presents the defiantly idealistic quest of the quintessential Romantic outsider Guglielmo Ratcliff, who pursues Maria MacGregor even though her father has dismissed his marital bid and Maria has herself rejected him. Ratcliff, who already has several murders under his belt — having slain Maria's previous fiancés on their wedding-eve and presented her with blood-soaked wedding rings — continues his methodical destruction of Maria's suitors. He fights Count Douglas in a duel and is defeated, but Douglas spares his life. Ratcliff does not learn any compassion from this experience, however; eventually he kills Maria too, then her father, and finally himself. The historical entanglements which drive the plot almost defy summary: in Act 4 we, and Ratcliff, learn from Margherita that Elisa, Maria's mother, and Edvardo, Ratcliff's father, had been lovers but MacGregor, upon learning of their affair had murdered Edvardo, with Elisa succumbing to her grief a few days later.

Lacking character development — the heroine is excluded from the middle two acts (and Act 2 seems tangential to the main action, in any case) — and presenting us with a psychopathically jealous protagonist with an over-intense sense of 'honour' (perhaps it's worth noting that Verdi's *Otello* had been premiered in Milan in 1887), *Guglielmo Ratcliff* doesn't seem at first

glance an auspicious choice for Wexford. That this was such a compelling evening is a result of the unstinting commitment and imaginative vision of, equally, director Fabio Ceresa and conductor Francesco Cilluffo, as well as some stunning vocal performances by the principals.

Despite the prevalence of butchery and bloodshed, Ceresa and his designer, Tiziano Santi, present us with sets blached ivory white, gleaming with silvery sheen and mirrored reflections (costumes, by Giuseppe Palella, are similarly opulent), thereby creating a strangely dislocating detachment, despite the emotional intensity portrayed. Redolent silver birches double as picture frames which enclose the action. Ceresa overcomes the static nature of the expository accounts by presenting the deceased, the dying and the ‘living but deranged’ in co-existence; the ghosts of the departed, whose erotic conspiracies and treacheries cast spectral shadows over their progeny, take animal form and mingle hauntingly amidst the living. The phantom wolves and deer are marvellously embodied by four dancers — Mattia Agatiello, Alexander McCabe, Noemi Bresciani and Riccardo Olivier — their movements choreographed with serpentine sinuousness by Olivier. Whether mounting the banqueting table to deliver Douglas’s challenge to Ratcliff, or snakily elongating atop the icy ruins of a fallen tree — its outstretched branches clutching the air like grotesquely gnarled fingers — these apparitions are chillingly evocative.

Apart from the excessive *verismo* violence of its plot — which makes *Cavalleria Rusticana* seem like a children’s nursery rhyme — another reason for the opera’s neglect may be the absence of tenors willing to take the risk of tackling the recklessly and dauntingly arduous eponymous role. The first incumbent was Giovanni Battista de Negri, famous in Italy for his interpretations of both Wagner and Verdi; and the role demands both the qualities of a *heldentenor* and of a lyric singer of warmth and brightness. This is surely one of the most strenuous tenor parts ever written, and Wexford was immensely fortunately to have secured the services of Angelo Villari who swaggered tirelessly and with unflagging heroic lustre through the lengthy role, seemingly untroubled by its relentless fortissimos and insistently high tessitura. Villari’s rendition of Ratcliff’s long-phrased Act 2 aria, ‘Quando fanciullo ancora’, in which he describes his first meeting with Maria to his friend Lesley, was wonderfully sensuous. And, Ratcliff’s triumphant trumpeting was complemented by moments — albeit just a few — of subdued reflection.

Italian soprano Mariangela Sicilia exhibited a radiant *spinto* timbre as Maria, slicing cleanly and brightly through Mascagni’s thickly scored accompaniments but also conveying shadows and darkness. Sicilia had to wait a while for her moment, but she matched Villari in the heated lines of their Act IV confrontation (a number reminiscent of the encounter between Turiddu and Santuzza in *Cavalleria*).



[Cast of *Guglielmo Ratcliff* by Mascagni](#)

As the crazed eccentric, Margherita, teller of grisly truths, mezzo-soprano Annunziata Vestri was aurally and visually (complete with white contact lenses) spot on, playing the role of ‘family historian’ in Act 1 with riveting concentration. Writing of Vestri’s performance as Rosa Mamai, in Wexford’s 2012 production of Francesco Cilea’s *L’Arlesiana* (in which Sicilia took the role of Vivetta), I admired her ‘dark, impassioned tone [which] was matched by a notable stamina’ and her ‘bold stage presence and impressive technical

prowess: her Act 3 ‘Esser madre è un inferno’ was the undoubted highlight of the night’. Such richness of expression and dramatic impact characterised Margherita’s Act 4 ballad, and these qualities were also powerfully evident during the lunchtime recital which Vestri (accompanied by Carmen Santoro) gave on 23 October in the church of St Iberius. With ‘The Sacred and the Profane’ as her theme, Vestri’s performance of the ‘Agnus Dei’ from Rossini’s *Petite Messe Solennelle*, delivered from the pulpit, was particularly noteworthy for its extensive, at times grainy, range of vocal colours, while the coolness of the declamatory recitation of Debussy’s *Chanson de Bilitis*, the astonishing intensity of Vestri’s lower register in Norma’s prayer and the triumphant self-confidence of Delilah’s ‘Amour! viens aider ma faiblesse’ left no doubt about the generosity of Vestri’s artistry.

As MacGregor, whose actions two decades previously have set the torturous tragedy in motion, Italian bass Gianluca Buratto revealed the backstory to Douglas in Act I with full-blooded tone. David Stout used his baritone with thoughtfulness and (if the adjective can be applied in this most intemperate of operas) with subtlety as Douglas.

Cilluffo conducted with authority, crafting a persuasive whole from Mascagni’s reeling, and at times clichéd, musical spasms, maintaining momentum through the narrative passages as the orchestra took up vocal phrases and motifs. The lyrical beauty of the melody of the Act 3 *Intermezzo* was wonderfully distilled; and the *Prelude* to Act 4 was well sung by the Wexford Chorus, who had little to do elsewhere.

The combination of extreme vocal demands, an excess of blood-shedding, and an absence of dramatic action may prevent *Guglielmo Ratcliff* from ever achieving a secure place in the repertory. But, this opera undoubtedly stirs the emotions. Ratcliff’s haunting Act 3 ‘dream sequence’ is in many ways the expressive centre of the work; and the opera is itself, in a sense, Ratcliff’s own ‘dream’. The work remained Mascagni’s favourite among his operas, and a letter of April 1886, to his close friend at the Milan Conservatory, the engineer Vittorio Gianfranceschi, is revealing of the composer’s passionate identification with his protagonist:

‘At last I have been able to find a romanza to my taste for William’s narrative in the second act; and in saying “romanza” I speak the biggest piece of nonsense ever said in my life. I wouldn’t know otherwise how to describe it, since it has a special form and, I think, is completely new ... I don’t know, it’s not possible for me to describe it; I myself do not yet understand it; I do know that it is all heart, all passion, all sorrow; I don’t judge it, don’t examine it in cold blood; I would be afraid to; maybe I’d tear it all up; I know there are 120 blank verses; maybe it’s not performable; I don’t want to know anything; I have composed it as I had to; when I hear it I am moved, I am transported into the regions of the ideal and of fantasy; that’s enough for me! ... This, my newest music, has certainly been dictated by a strong sorrow ...’

This Wexford production absolutely and thrillingly conveys the rapture and ecstasy expressed by the young Mascagni.

‘Of *Le Pré-aux-clercs* there is no need to speak; everyone knows it by heart.’ Thus wrote Adolphe Adam in a memoir of the composer Ferdinand Hérold, published in 1857. Adam’s optimism is not born out by the passing of time; today, Hérold is known more or less exclusively for his ballet *La fille mal gardée* and the overture to the opera *Zampa*. But, Wexford’s co-production of *Le Pré-aux-Clercs* (with Palazzatto Bru Zane (Centre de musique romantique français) in partnership with Foundation Calouste Gulbenkian), originally directed by Éric Ruf and revived here by Laurent Delvert, makes a convincing case for the third of Wexford Festival Opera’s 2015 productions, blending tongue-in-cheek comedy with romantic sentimentality in a tastefully designed staging.

Le Pré aux clercs (literally, ‘the Clerk’s meadow’, a favourite duelling and promenading ground opposite the Louvre) was premiered in December 1832, less than a month before its composer died from tuberculosis at the age of thirty-one. The work, which is set against the historical tensions between Protestants and Catholics following the 1572 St Bartholomew Day Massacre, proved enormously popular at *the Opéra Comique*. In contrast to Wexford’s other 2015 productions, its romantic protagonists do eventually obtain their hearts’ desire, though this is not without others paying a heavy price. Ruf’s

approach, though, points up the comic aspects of the work; indeed, the *outré* Renaissance costumes, which borrow exaggerated colours and capes from *commedia dell'arte*, and the somewhat heavy-handed articulation of the lengthy French spoken dialogue occasionally threaten to push the work towards caricature and even coarseness. But, the musical sweetness ultimately reins in any threat of boorishness.

If Wexford's productions of *Koanga* and *Guglielmo Ratcliff* both stressed the claustrophobic and oppressive grip of history, then Ruf's conception and design for *Le Pré aux clercs* lay emphasis on the 'lighter' side of political and personal intrigue: the breezy autumnal trees, which part in Act 2 to reveal the wall of the Louvre palace, conveyed a welcome freshness and directness.

The libretto by Eugène de Planard, based on Prosper Mérimée's *Chronique du règne de Charles IX*, opens in 1582, ten years after the St. Bartholomew's Day Massacre. In the initial scene, set at the royal hunting ground of Étampes, innkeeper Nicette (the god-daughter of Marguerite — who is the wife of Henry IV of Navarre and sister to Henry III, King of France) joyfully celebrates her forthcoming nuptials with Girot, the host of the Pré-aux-Clercs. Marguerite herself has been detained at the Louvre as a hostage of peace between the two sovereigns, accompanied by her lady-in-waiting Isabelle de Montal, a Béarnaise countess. Isabelle rejects the advances of the Catholic Comte de Comminge, preferring the Baron de Mergy, who is sent by Navarre to recall his Queen and Isabelle. The Italian Cantarelli is drawn by Marguerite into the subterfuge as she plans a secret marriage between Isabelle and Mergy. Informed by Henry III that Marguerite and Isabelle are not to return to Navarre and that the Isabelle will marry Comminge, Mergy challenges the latter to a duel, to take place the next day at the Pré-aux-Clercs. Both nuptial celebrants and duelling parties there gather; Canterelli has been instructed by Marguerite to ensure the safe conduct of Isabelle and Mergy to Navarre. Incensed by his discovery of Isabelle's devotion to Mergy, and their secret wedding, Comminge is then defeated in the duel, and Isabelle and Mergy flee to Navarre with Cantarelli as their guide.

The Canadian duo, soprano Magali Simard-Galdès and baritone Tomislav Lavoie, eased us delightfully into proceedings, demonstrating vocal charm and dramatic vivacity. It was almost a shame that their duet, which established a wonderfully ebullient spirit, was followed by the arrival of Mergy, thereby abruptly curtailing the buoyancy of their sincere happiness! Indeed, throughout the opera Nico Darmanin's Baron de Mergy was polished but rather relentless in delivery, though some vocal rigidity might be forgiven as the role's tessitura is unforgivingly high. Simard-Galdès, however, revealed a captivating vocal agility, not least in the Act 3 rondo, 'À la fleur du bel âge', with which she serenades her wedding guests.

French-Canadian soprano Marie-Ève Munger had to wait until the start of Act 2 for her show-stopping number, but (on 23 October) she delivered the goods with extremely impressive technical assurance and musicality. In 'Jours de mon enfance' Isabelle sings of her love for Mergy; Munger's coloratura was unwaveringly accurate, piercingly bright and sweetly intoned. The phrasing demonstrated considerable musical intelligence, and Munger's diminuendos were executed with superlative control, and matched for expressive grace by the Wexford Festival Orchestra's leader, Fionnuala Hunt, whose heart-warming obbligato earned her greatly deserved acclaim at the curtain call. Munger's sparkling vivacity was also much in evidence at a lunch-time recital on 24 October (when she was impressively supported by pianist Marie-Ève Scarfone), where she made Bernstein's 'Glitter and be Gay' flash with brilliant glints, to complement the sultry richness of Richard Strauss's 'Serenade' and the lyrical eloquence of a Schubert lied.

As Marguerite de Valois, French mezzo-soprano Marie Lenormand was an authoritative regal presence, but her mezzo-soprano sounded rather inhibited at times. Eric Huchet tapped into a broad comic vein as Cantarelli, all self-pitying pouting and posturing; in particular, he delivered his spoken dialogue with a flamboyance and flourish. As Comminges, Dominique Côté indulged an exaggerated villainous swagger. Complementing Ruf's traditional and no-nonsense staging, conductor Jean-Luc Tingaud's reading was unfussy, as he drew forth the melodic persuasiveness of the attractive score. The Wexford Festival Chorus made much of the lively choruses.

At the final reckoning, Hérold's music may be a trifle too saccharine for my

taste, but the opera’s melodies are beguiling, the set-pieces persuasive and this opera was a sweet antidote to the bitter emotions and dramatic acridity of the Festival’s other two main house productions.

The Festival also presented, as usual, three ‘Short Works’, this year in the venue of White’s Hotel. Given that we are living in an ‘age of austerity’, director Jack Furness’s decision to present Humperdinck’s *Hansel and Gretel* (23 October) in a ‘cardboard city’ — or, so the projections stated, as ‘A Fantasy in Cardboard: a tale with a moral’ — seemed apposite, and economical. Father returned from a foray, propped upon crutches, with a battered rucksack bearing the fruits of a food-bank visit: strings of onions, bags of crisps and bottles of sugar-laden pop. The children were dressed in mismatched hand-me-downs: Gretel’s *Kermit* ti-shirt and ra-ra skirt clashed discordantly with Hansel’s grey trackie-bottoms, lumberjack checked shirt, and red, side-ways perched baseball cap. An odd basket and bowl relieved the dourness of the mounds of empty boxes which formed the family domain (helpfully labelled ‘door’, ‘window’), but they offered little sustenance for Hansel and Gretel — excepting a jug a cream whose devoured contents resulted a ‘Sugar Rush’ which led the hyper-active, petulant teens to wreck the parental home. Such re-arrangement of the set was at times distracting; the transition to the towering columns of the forest in Act 2 was cumbersome and time-consuming, although the construction of the Witch’s sweet-toothed delectations in Act 3 was swift and smooth.

Just as the two siblings are forced to use their imaginations to overcome their pangs of physical and emotional hunger, so we were urged to take imaginative leaps, and the use of puppetry was an effective stimulus. The presentation of both the Sandman (Frances Israel) and the Dew Fairy (Rachel Croash) made good use of paper marionettes; similarly, a smoky haze and torch search-lights were an evocative accompaniment to the Witches’ Ride sequence during the transition to Act 2: economical means, impressive results.

Emma Nash’s Gretel possessed a lovely, individualised vocal colour; Nash added frisson to the duets with Hansel, and other ensembles, conveying a rich inner life struggling against external deprivation. Her sweetly floated lullaby, following the Sandman’s invitation (sung rather precipitously by Israel — I’d have liked more spaciousness), blended beautifully with Anna Jeffers’ Hansel: the intonation was satisfyingly centred. Elsewhere, however, Jeffers seemed rather underpowered at the lower end of her range, particularly in the passages of denser piano accompaniment (played with accomplishment by Janet Haney). She was also out-played in dramatic terms by Nash; this was a rather inhibited Hansel, lacking mischievous exuberance, snivelling unattractively when faced with the Witch’s temptations and threats.

Kate Allen was a rich-voiced Mother, but Sheldon Baxter, while exhibiting an appealing tone as Father, was a little rough around the edges: the phrasing at times lacked elegance and the intonation wandered. Christina M. Gill’s Witch brandished her broom menacingly; but, on the whole, she did not inspire terror — her cardboard oven was less than petrifying.

Overall, this was a sensible and unfussy presentation; small details — such as the concluding tearing apart of the baked gingerbread Witch, echoing the children’s frustrated anguish of the opening scene — made their mark. And, it was a canny move to involve children from local primary schools; they engaged committedly and encouraged a positive audience reception.

Tosca , directed by Dafydd Hall Williams (and seen on 24 October), was similarly focused and direct in presentation: an easel, effigy of the Virgin and an altar were all that were required to set the scene. Preliminary screen projections of 1940s Italian street scenes established the oppressive socio-political context; and it was a stroke of imaginative genius to return to this visual milieu in the closing moments — as *Tosca*, with arms wide-stretched, was juxtaposed with ever-nearing shots of the fateful scene of her suicidal demise. The only less sure touch was the final scene change, when the removal of Scarpia’s body and the ‘packing up’ of the autocrat’s office were a little protracted. Greg Ritchey’s sensitive piano accompaniment was a highlight.

There was some initial lightness to assuage the prevailing misery, with Jan Capiński’s Sacristan absent-mindedly placing his head-piece on the altar, and

‘blessing’ the bread provided in Cavaradossi’s basket of provisions as if it were communion fare. But, darkness rapidly fell. And, Eunhee Kim’s fervent and full-toned Tosca did much to raise the emotional temperature. Though Kim’s acting was a little inhibited, her vocal commitment was unstinted: ‘Vissi d’arte’ was impressive — mature and thoughtful, and Kim sustained her vocal power to the last. Alexandros Tsilogiannis might have profitably taken his foot off the vocal pedal from time to time; this was an unrelenting presentation, whose highlight was the Act 1 duet ‘Qual’occhio’ in which Tsilogiannis’s tenor merged affectingly with Kim’s resonant soprano. ‘E lucevan le stelle’ was occasionally a little under the note, but there was no doubting Tsilogiannis’s commitment.

Quentin Hayes’ Scarpia was a well-judged portrait of evil. Hayes’ diction was exceptionally clear and his interpretation uncomplicated and convincing: this Scarpia was, paradoxically, both dignified and debauched, and Hayes kept the tyrant’s anger under restraint, making the swelling outbursts of anger and outrage all the more telling. Henry Grant Kerswell was somewhat cumbersome, dramatically, as Angelotti, but made a strong vocal impression. In the minor roles, Raffaele D’Ascanio was nuanced and thoughtful as Spoletta, and David Howes was a very competent Sciarrane.

Portraits of Manon (25 October) comprised a ‘Scene from *Manon*’ together with Massenet’s *Le Portrait de Manon*, in which the composer returned to the character of the aging Chevalier des Grieux, an old man obsessed with his memories of Manon who forbids his nephew Jean to marry his amour, Aurore, as he believes her lacking in ranks and wealth (though, unbeknown to des Grieux, Aurore is the niece of Manon, and ultimately all ends happily). Seemingly compact, it was, however, the least successful Short Work. Though sensitively staged and designed, and evocatively lit by John Crudden, the lack of surtitles, the lengthy French exposition and the fact that director Rob Kearley instructed the principals to deliver much of the action from a prone or floor-bound position — thus depriving much of the un-raked audience in White’s Hotel of visual clarification — made this intimate work disconcertingly inaccessible and distant. Eunhee Kim’s Manon was well sung but differed little in dramatic presentation from her Tosca of the day before; Stephen Anthony Brown was initially rather forthright as Des Grieux, but in the *Portrait* displayed intelligent musical nuance as Tiberge. Baritone Ian Beadle brought much tenderness to the role of the elder Des Grieux, while soprano Maria McGrann, from Northern Ireland, displayed considerable vocal beauty as Aurore, and collaborated well with Emma Watkinson in the role of the frustrated, love-lorn Jean de Moncerf.

Whatever minor misgivings one might have about any particular Wexford production or Short Work, this 64th offering confirmed that the Festival fills gaps and prompts responses that are not imitated or equalled elsewhere. 2016 will bring stagings of Félicien David’s *Herculanum*, *Vanessa* by Samuel Barber, and Donizetti’s *Maria de Rudenz*.

Claire Seymour

Delius: *Koanga*

Koanga: Norman Garrett, Palmyra: Nozuko Teto, Uncle Joe: Aubrey Allicock, Don José Martinez:Christopher Robertson, Rangwan: Aubrey Allicock, Clotilda: Kate Allen, Simon Perez: Jeff Gwaltney, Jeanne: Frances Israel, Renee: Rachel Croash, Helene: Eleanor Garside, Marie: Maria Hughes, Aurore: Emma Watkinson, Hortense: Vivien Conacher, Olive: Laura Murphy, Paulette: Jennifer Parker; Dancers: Sifiso Selby Khumalo, Sifiso Thamsanqa Majola, Magcino Pamella Shange, Mzamo Jabu Siphika, Kayla Smith; Director: Michael Gieleta Conductor: Stephen Barlow, Set Designer: James Macnamara, Projection Designer: Seán O’Riordan, Costume Designer: Sarah Roberts, Lighting Designer: Ian Sommerville, Choreographer: Boyzie Cekwana; Chorus and Orchestra of Wexford Festival Opera.

Mascagni: *Guglielmo Ratcliffn*

Guglielmo Ratcliff: Angelo Villari, Maria: Mariangela Sicilia, Count Douglas: David Stout, Margherita: Annunziata Vestri, MacGregor: Gianluca Burrato, Lesley: Alexandros Tsilogiannis, Tom: Quentin Hayes, Willie: Sarah Redmond, Robin: Henry Grant Kerswell, Dick: Stephen Anthony Brown, Bell: Matthew Wright, John: Rory Musgrave, Taddie: Raffaele D’Ascanio, Servant: Simon Chalford Giles; Dancers: Mattia Agatiello, Noemi Bresciani, Alexander McCabe, Riccardo Olivier; Director: Fabio Ceresa, Conductor: Francesco Cilluffo, Set Designer: Tiziano Santi, Costume Designer: Giuseppe Palella, Lighting Designer: Ian Sommerville, Choreography:

Riccardo Olivier; Chorus and Orchestra of Wexford Festival Opera.

Ferdinand Hérold: *Le Pré-aux-cleres*

Marguerite de Valois: Marie Lenormand, Isabelle de Montal; Marie-Ève Munger, Nicette: Magali Simard-Galdès, Baron de Mergy: Nico Darmanin, Comte de Comminges: Dominique Côté, Cantarelli: Eric Huchet, Girot: Tomislav Lavoie, Le Brigadier: Felix Kemp, L’exempt du guet: Jan Capiński, Archer 1: David Howes, Archer 2: Sheldon Baxter; Dancers: Alexandre Bado, Camille Brulais, Ghislain Grellier, Constantino Imperatore, Anna Konopska; Director: Éric Ruf, Conductor: Jean-Luc Tingaud, Revival Director: Laurent Delvert, Set Designer: Éric Ruf, Costume Designer: Renato Bianchi, Lighting Designer: Ian Sommerville, Choreographer: Glyslein Lefever; Chorus and Orchestra of Wexford Festival Opera.

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