

Wexford Festival at the Wexford Opera House



Neil Fisher
October 20 2010 12:01AM



One for the head, one for the heart and one for fun — that is the unofficial motto behind programming one of the highlights in the Irish arts calendar. The annual Wexford Festival, now in its 59th year, is still juggling three operas across three weeks from the farthest fringes of the repertoire. This year, though, there was also a gamble on the new: the European premiere of Peter Ash's *The Golden Ticket*, a hugely anticipated American adaptation of Roald Dahl's *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*.

A pity that *The Golden Ticket* is not a very moreish treat. If there is a Willy Wonka flavour to Ash's samey score, then it's raspberry, as belching brass follows the hard-working boy soprano Michael Kepler Meo practically everywhere as his Charlie wanders saucer-eyed through his great adventure.

But the burps don't fill in the blanks. The biggest hole is Wonka-shaped: there's no mystery or seduction about this man, merely a few opaque lines from Donald Sturrock's serviceable libretto, and a bland, cane-twirling performance from the baritone Wayne Tigges. At crucial moments in the narrative, Ash simply misses his

Great warmth: Pumeza Matshikiza as Vendulka in Smetana's *Hubicka*
Clive Barda

Post a comment

Follow Classical Music

★ Recommend (0)

Print

Email

Share

Like 0

opportunities: the hilarious mishaps suffered by Charlie's insufferable rivals happen almost as an afterthought; the Oompa-Loompas' gleeful ditties are dispatched without invention. James Robinson's production is fluid, but video projections of candy are no substitute for the real thing.

Real sweetness comes elsewhere. Smetana's *Hubicka (The Kiss)* is a delightfully rustic Czech comedy, performed with great warmth in Michael Gielata's clear-eyed staging. Pumeza Matshikiza sings gorgeously as Vendulka, who won't give her fiancé a kiss until their wedding day; Peter Berger is the intended, singing with virile abandon and plenty of wounded pride. Jaroslav Kyzlink, the dynamic Czech maestro, conducts the Festival Orchestra with native wit.

That leaves the festival's serving of red meat, here fulfilled in Saverio Mercadante's lurid 1850s thriller, *Virginia*. Mercadante fits into Italian opera somewhere between Donizetti and Verdi and if he lacks both composers' facility for melody, his music is just as red-blooded, as is Carlos Izcaray's conducting.

If the noirish story — the tale of a corrupt Roman patrician, Appio, who'll bend any law to have his way with the eponymous heroine — doesn't grip, blame Kevin Newbury's awkward, time-hopping production, which is desperately sketchy on characterisation.

The sparks were all vocal: the stylish Ivan Magrì, singing Appio, is an Italian tenor to watch, but the real find is Angela Meade's stunning Virginia, singing with a thrilling combination of pliancy and power. This year, she's Wexford's real golden ticket.

Box office: +353-539 122144, to Oct 30