

OPERA TODAY

OPERA NEWS, COMMENTARY, AND REVIEWS FROM AROUND THE WORLD

If there were one reason to venture to Wexford this year, it would be to experience the powerhouse performance of *Maria* by Roman Statkowski. I will forgive you for asking “what,” “by who?” for this work is virtually unknown outside of the composer’s native Poland. Some enterprising company should take up its cause (Santa Fe? Bard?) for it is a thrill-inducing gem. From the first dramatic outburst issuing forth from the pit, we were mesmerized, by the Straussian orchestral effects, by the musical nods to Prokofiev and Shostakovich, by the heroic vocal writing, by the bone-chilling production, and by the tremendous musical performance worthy of any world stage.

Under Tomasz Tokarczyk’s baton, the awesome collection of musicians outdid themselves, playing with brio, depth, and attention to detail. The moody piece seemed to fit this Irish band like a glove and the shifting moods and modulations of the (estranged) love duet were evocative and romantic. I must confess, as good as they were, I thought how thrilling it might be to hear the Vienna or Met pit take on this Herculean score, but for right now this was playing of the highest order. When the Maestro was called on stage for his tumultuous reception, it was almost shocking to discover him to be quite slight of stature, for he so firmly inspired such magnificent, over-sized music-making. Bravo, Mr. Tokarczyk. Bravi tutti.

The hapless Maria of the title was strongly sung by Dana Masiero. Perhaps too strongly. Ms. Masiero has a decidedly full soprano with *spinto* leanings and a generous womanly vibrato. She has had success with Puccini and Verdi roles. And she is an assured presence on stage, well acquainted with sustained gestures that are part of a diva’s bag of tricks. However, the lesser-if-not-lower class girl is here more Jenufa than Tosca; more Katja than Aida. Everything about Dana’s performance was polished and first rate, it was just grander than the part demands. As

her love interest, the hapless Count's son Wacław, tenor Rafał Bartmiński was giving 'the' performance of this or many another festival. Tall and lanky with a youthful face and mop of sandy hair, he didn't so much impersonate as become the unlucky loser. When Mr. Bartmiński sang with melting beauty and caressed a phrase, you pegged him as a pre-eminent Mozartean. Then when he pinned you in your seat with an orchestra-riding, Vickers-like Heldentenor B-flat, you thought (as the goose bumps rise): where the hell could that have come from? His technique seems secure, his production free, his forte passages unforced, his sense of arching line well judged, his stamina amazing. If he keeps it all together, this is a major talent.



As his father Count Palatine, Krzysztof Szumanski showed off a dark bass and favored us with sinuously malevolent phrases that drove the plot. Conversely, Adam Kruszeński used his pliable, rich-voiced Governor as a perfect, sympathetic foil to the Count. Excellent casting choices, which included the moving, mysterious Waif from Eleanor Jane Greenwood who scored in both of her vital but brief scenes. The young ensemble singers were key to the success and quality of the Festival, and to single out but a few memorable achievements: Marci Gelsa made for a powerful Cavalry Captain; Jamie Rock scored in his moment as a Drunken Nobleman; Byron Jackson made a fine impression as Zmora; and Thomas Faulkner sang well as the Masked Guard.

The production team made a bold, effective choice to update the story, telescoping the end of World War Two, the onset of communism, and Glasnost/Solidarity. This provided a most apt environment to frame the struggles and Big Ideas of the piece. And it sparked a field day for its designers. First and foremost, rarely has video projection been used as effectively as here, as created by designer Andrzej Goulding. He has devised an ever evolving environment, chockfull of resonant images that are still highly charged for us emotionally. And Goulding has provided a recurring video snowstorm that unifies the entire piece. James Macnamara has designed multiple, Soviet Bloc settings that are suggestive but not slavishly architectural, allowing for fluid movement from an apparatchik's office to a ceremonial ballroom; to a dreary, spooky factory yard with an old construction building as residence for Maria and her father, and a disused merry-go-round that once was a playground for the family housing. Fabio Toblini provided a full parade of 60's fashion for the elite, and depressingly correct lower class attire for the working proletariat. Here, as with the other two operas, Declan Randall proved to be a company treasure with another masterful lighting design full of well-calculated effects, sensitively cued.

Much of the evening's success must rest with director Michael Gieleta who wrung out every bit of theatricality and melodrama to be found in the piece. The character relationships were uncommonly clear, and their interaction was meaningful, being grounded in the text and music. Maria's murder was well judged and its simple stagecraft was powerful and direct. Having the privileged ballroom revelers dance and boogie as if to a Tarantella at the frenzied end of Act One, and then having them suddenly become aware that they literally have the blood of the commoners on their hands, held out to us and displayed as they stagger to the apron, was a most powerful symbol. The one moment that I would invite Mr. Gieleta to polish was the reunion scene between Wacław and Maria. It owes a debt to the recognition Scene in "Elektra" when the heroine realizes he has returned after an inexplicable, long absence, and she hurls his name over a thundering orchestra which then pulls back in volume and mood. The moment and re-connection of the two characters lost its truthful way for about five minutes. But this is a small bit of carping indeed, and we owe Wexford a debt of gratitude for its astonishing, lovingly staged revelation of *Maria*.

Wexford Festival Opera has not only maintained, but has greatly refined its mission of providing lesser (or little) known pieces in top flight productions with tomorrow's stars. I promise you, there is no other festival like it in the world. All serious opera-goers should rejoice in its

accomplishment. The 2012 Season (24 Oct - 4 Nov) promises to carry on the tradition with *Le Roi Malgré Lui* (Chabrier), *A Village Romeo and Juliet* (Delius), and *Francesca da Rimini* (Mercadante).

James Sohre

Maria by Roman Statkowski Maria: Daria Masiero; Wacław: Rafał Bartmiński; District Governor: Adam Kruszewski; Count Palatine: Krzysztof Szumanski; Palatine's Envoy: Daniel Joy; Waif: Eleanor Jean Greenwood; Zmora: Byron Jackson; Cavalry Captain: Marcin Gelsa; Drunken Nobleman: Jamie Rock; Masked Guard: Thomas Faulkner. Conductor: Tomasz Tokarczyk. Director: Michael Gieleta. Set Design: James Macnamara. Costume Design: Fabio Toblini. Lighting Design: Declan Randall. Video Design: Andrzej Goulding. Choreography: Edel Quinlan. Chorus Master: Gavin Carr.

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