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THE SUNDAY TIMES

# Wexford Festival, Ireland

A young South African soprano sang with heart and soul in Wexford, which left the rest of the singing seeming to lack sensibility

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Pumeza Matshikiza as Vendulka in Smetana's 'folk opera' The Kiss (Handout)

Jaroslav Kyzlink, that caught the ear most consistently.

It helped that Virginia was fabulously well sung by the much-talked-up American soprano Angela Meade, only two years into her professional career, but making waves (she has already sung Bellini's Norma, an iconic role for aspirants to the crowns of the bel canto queens, Maria Callas, Montserrat Caballé and Joan Sutherland). Virginia requires something of Norma's long-breathed melodic grace, showy coloratura and sheer stamina.

What Meade as yet lacks in temperament — she cuts a homely figure in Allen Moyer's unflattering frocks — she more than compensates for with her rock-solid technique and shining timbre, which seems to gain in radiance the higher she goes — a rare gift in so young a soprano.

Her expressive features and discreet, sincere acting make her an utterly sympathetic figure as the Roman matron, lusted after by a tyrannical despot, Appio Claudio, who orders the murder of her young husband after their wedding in order to have his evil way with her. To save her from a fate worse than death, her father, Virginio, stabs her before the spitefully vindictive Appio hands her over to his henchman, Marco, as a slave. The rest of the singing may lack Meade's artistic sensibility, but two young tenors, Ivan Magri (Appio) and Bruno Ribiero, sang with lusty and sometimes sensitive Italianità.

Their Act II vocal cockfight — tenor duets are hard to find in Italian opera after Rossini — was a thrilling vocal standoff. If neither has a gold-star instrument, they will both surely have estimable careers: slim, good-looking and lively actors with ringing top notes, they will be snapped up by tenor-hungry houses and audiences. Looking more like Virginia's younger brother than her father (clearly the director, Kevin Newbury,

Next year, Ireland's Wexford Festival Opera celebrates its 60th, but so precarious is the economic situation in the republic that firm plans have yet to be announced. Regular patrons can only rejoice, then, that the new Wexford Opera House, now in its third year, was built before the Irish government's and Wexford's sponsors' credit crumbled.

Even so, the news from south-east Ireland is almost as bright as was last weekend's unseasonable weather: sponsorship is up, and, under the benign aegis of the artistic director, David Agler, standards have rarely, if ever, been higher. Certainly in my experience — I've been a frequent visitor since 1979 — the playing of the recently formed (ad hoc) Wexford Festival Orchestra far surpasses anything heard in the 1980s and 1990s. Both in Mercadante's **Virginia** and Smetana's Hubicka (The Kiss), it was the orchestral playing and the idiomatic conducting of the operas' respective maestri, Carlos Izcaray — another product of the revolutionary Venezuelan "Sistema" of music education — and the Brno-born

doesn't believe in wigs and make-up), the American baritone Hugh Russell may be a stiff actor and face contortionist, but this is another fine voice. Gianluca Buratto (Marco) had little to do other than scowl thuggishly, but he did it with a huge, powerful Italian basso, which I'd love to hear in larger roles.

Newbury's staging is an effective, if bizarre, mishmash of neoclassical kitsch and contemporary kitchen sink. Only the decorous Roman "orgy" turns out to be vulgar: McVicaresque fancy dress without the naked boobs and blow jobs. A trio of scantily clad adolescent winged "cherubs", with only titter-inducing bunches of golden grapes to hide their privates, flounce around amusingly. All good clean fun, but it makes a stark contrast to the virtuous 1980s Ikea austerity of Virginia's humble abode. Newbury gets committed performances from his singers and Izcaray supplies the necessary dramatic propulsion from the pit.

Better still is Michael Gieleta's disarmingly simple and empathetic staging of **The Kiss**. Smetana's "folk opera" is a wistful romcom — a later, less rollickingly folksy piece than his *Bartered Bride* — about a young woman who refuses her prospective husband a kiss out of respect for his recently deceased wife. When he rejects her aggressively and flaunts his dalliances with more obliging village girls, Vendulka leaves home disguised as a man, and gets mixed up with a band of sausage-smugglers controlled by her aunt, who encourages a reconciliation. When Vendulka changes her mind, Lukas refuses to kiss her until his neighbours plead with him to relent, and he reveals he's only joking. It may sound thin stuff, but Smetana's score is full of side-hugging moments: Vendulka's lullaby, her duet with Lukas, and her big change of heart are among Smetana's most moving creations. In this ideally intimate theatre, in Gieleta's devastatingly truthful staging — beautiful abstract sets by James Macnamara, late 1940s costumes by Fabio Toblini, atmospheric lighting by Christopher Akerlind — this is a Wexford evening as near to perfection as any I have attended.

I doubt if it could be bettered musically today, even in Brno, Bratislava or Prague. Wexford's chorus, from the Czech capital and expertly trained by Lubomir Matl, is in its element, as were the mostly native cast: Peter Berger's characteristically nasal Slovak tenor suggests Lukas's less than admirable qualities, but his fearless high notes and his passion redeem him. The very young Jiri Pribyl is none too convincing aged up as Vendulka's doddering old father, but his voice is glorious, and there are fine cameos from Eliska Weissova (Vendulka's aunt), Ekaterina Bakanova (her friend, Barce) and Bradley Smoak as the strikingly youthful "old smuggler" of Smetana's original. The undoubted star of the show, however, is Pumeza Matshikiza's searingly sung Vendulka. The young South African soprano — and former Young Artist at Covent Garden — is still a work in progress from the technical point of view, but she pours out her heart and soul in her strikingly smokey lyric soprano, whose gleaming top is like the sun emerging from the clouds. There's a star in the making here; let's hope she is nurtured so that her potential can be fulfilled. Wexford vindicates a minor masterpiece here.

I wish I could enthuse as much about Peter Ash and Donald Sturrock's operatic adaptation of Roald Dahl's *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*. **The Golden Ticket** premiered at Opera Theatre of St Louis this summer, and this was its first European outing. In St Louis it was marketed as a family opera, but there were precious few children at Wexford's glitzy first night, even though I spotted empty seats. A festival that trumpets its outreach credentials should surely have dished out free tickets to teens and under.

That said, I'm not convinced children would have enjoyed the experience any more than I did: little of Sturrock's text — amusing when read via surtitles — crossed the footlights, and apart from Michael Kepler Meo's winsome, amplified Charlie and the larger-than-life dramatic soprano of Miriam Murphy as Mrs Gloop and Grandma Georgina, few of the individual performers could compete with Jim Robinson's fanciful direction and Bruno Schwengl and Mark Pakledinaz's fantastical costume designs. Ash's score is eclectic and derivative, but its loose structuring robs the show of dramatic pace, and it never knows where and when to finish. Both overlong acts seem interminable, although there is still plenty to watch — Charlie's flight is a true apotheosis, but there's yet another scene, and it's anticlimactic.

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