



OPERA SEASON 2011-2012

# THE FIERY ANGEL

The scandalous opera by Prokofiev conducted by Valerij Gergiev

Teatro Regio, Wednesday 1<sup>st</sup> February 2012 at 20:00

*The Fiery Angel* by **Sergei Prokofiev**, returns to Teatro Regio from 1<sup>st</sup> to 11<sup>th</sup> February 2012 after nearly fifty years and this time under the conduction of **Valerij Gergiev**, great artistic director from the Mariinskij Theatre of St. Petersburg, who has conducted this opera around the world. The theatre soloists performers and the scenery are from Russia (a co-production with the Royal Opera House, Covent Garden, London). The **Orchestra** and **Chorus** will be those of the **Teatro Regio**.

The director is **David Freeman**. Freeman has the capability of bringing to life the true spirit of this opera. The scenery and the costumes, depicting metaphysical loneliness as well as inhabited by pale ghosts, are by **David Roger**. The lights are by Steve Whitson and Vladimir Lukasevič.

In 1919, Prokofiev, despite the difficulties in seeing his first three works on the stage, began enthusiastically, the composition of a new opera based on a novel by the Russian writer Valerij Brjusov, who had greatly impressed him when he read it for the first time, the novel being *The Fiery Angel*. The composer knew that the prospect of seeing his work on stage was rather small. However, he stubbornly devoted himself to composition and instrumentation work which took him, also due to his many commitments as a pianist, eight long years. As soon as the work was completed in 1927, some scenes were publicly performed but it did not make quite an impact on the audience, and it was because of this that *The Fiery Angel* was then lost among the papers of the Prokofiev, until it was rediscovered in 1952. It was only then that works began to present the whole opera to the public, an event that took place only after Prokofiev's death when the opera was performed as a concert version of the opera in Paris. A year later, in 1955, *The Fiery Angel* succeeded in having a performance at the 'La Fenice' theatre in Venice and it has since then continued to be hosted in major opera houses around the world.

The opera, inspired in symbolism, is set in Germany in the sixteenth century. The drama focuses on the figure of Renata who is the personification of the struggle between good and evil, two principles that in the opera tend to blur, making a clear distinction between them almost impossible. Renata is a young woman who receives frequent visits from the angel of fire, called Madiel who was guiding her on the path to holiness. When she reaches the age of sixteen she feels absolutely in love with Madiel and to satisfy her passion she desires to join him carnally, but the angel, utterly shocked by her reaction, leaves her abruptly. Later he promises to reappear as a human being and Renata believes that she can recognise Madiel as Count Heinrich. The girl spends a happy season with the count, but one day, unexpectedly, the man leaves her. Renata now lives a life of desperation and is constantly persecuted by spirits. It is like this, that she meets the knight Ruprecht, at an inn. He falls madly in love with her and decides to help her. Together they go to Cologne, in search of Heinrich. Renata uses magic, taught by the scholar Agrippa of Nettesheim, to trace her beloved, but as soon as he sees her, he rejects her yet again. Renata is invaded by hate and asks Ruprecht, the man who had been her lover, to challenge Madiel to a duel. The two men fought and Ruprecht leaves the duel seriously injured. Renata then decides to go to a convent,

but peace did not await for her there and shortly after her arrival the other nuns begin to feel the signs of the presence of evil spirits and denounced her to the Holy Inquisition. Ruprecht is also present at court hearing with his new travelling companions, Faust and Mephistopheles. The Inquisitor states that Renata is guilty of allowing the devil into the convent and he condemns her to be burnt at the stake.

When the composer began working on his fourth opera, his friend and colleague Mayakovsky warned him against the novel, since its content was considered far too religious, but Prokofiev had a different opinion about the book, as he explained in a letter: «There is very little theology in the *Angel of Fire*, but there are endless orgies». This work brought to light the most intriguing aspect according to Prokofiev: erotic love presented in a perverse, demonic and fantastic way. The choice of a romantic subject and of the "penetrating smell of sulfur" was in full harmony with the growing interest that Prokofiev felt in those years for religion and the occult. The composer, as on previous occasions, had personally written the libretto, cutting all the scenes that alluded to colours. He did that with the sole purpose of getting an uninterrupted dramatic crescendo. His intention was to create a continuous narrative right from the first scene where Renata hallucinates, then leading, inexorably, to the final dramatic episode of orgy and exorcism in the convent. The orchestra plays an important role in creating a strong cohesion among the five acts, not only commenting on the action, but also creating an atmosphere charged with tension with tense and aggressive music. Compared to the version of Brjusov, in the drama of Prokofiev there is no longer the knight Ruprecht at the centre, but the young Renata instead and her hysteria which dominates almost every scene, making this one of the most challenging role of the operatic repertoire.

Great Russian performers, soloist and acrobats, from the exceptional historic Mariinskij Theatre Company were invited for the performances. The role of the impervious Renata will be played by the soprano **Mlada Khudoley**, who has already attracted unanimous acclaim for her portrayals of strong and complex female characters such as Sieglinde, Salome and Lady Macbeth. In the role of Ruprecht is the expert baritone **Nikolai Putilin**, appreciated for his extraordinary gifts also as an actor. Putilin has played on international stages for nearly all the great baritone roles of the Russian repertoire. The Wagnerian tenor **Leonid Zachožev** is the ambiguous young Agrippa of Nettesheim. The young bass **Mikhail Petrenko** is the Inquisitor. Petrenko had his debut on international stage in 2004 under the direction of Daniel Barenboim. The Regio's Master of Choir is **Claudio Fenoglio**. During the five performances the leading roles will alternate: Evgenij Ulanov (Ruprecht), Ol'ga Sergeeva and Larisa Gogolevskaja (Renata), Vasilij Gorškov (Agrippa of Nettesheim), Alexei Tanovickij (the Inquisitor).

**You are reminded that the performance initially scheduled for Sunday 12<sup>th</sup> February at 15:00 was brought forward to Saturday 11<sup>th</sup> February at 15:00.**

*The Fiery Angel* will be **broadcast live** by **RAI-Radio 3** on **1<sup>st</sup> February** at **20:00** and it will be presented to the public by **Franco Pulcini** who presents *Incontro con l'Opera* to be held at the Piccolo Regio Puccini on Wednesday 18<sup>th</sup> January 17:30.

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Turin 23<sup>th</sup> January 2012

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