

The International Opera Scene in 2011

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Any wrap-up of the 2011 musical year by rights should begin with a moment of silence in memory of the New York City Opera, which, following a tragic series of management blunders starting several years ago, has ceased to exist as we knew it. Now a shadow of its former self, it looks to subsist as an itinerant company—and maybe not even that if it fails to reach agreement with the unions, which, sadly, have emerged as the only force to resist management's decision to shrink the company.

It wasn't a banner year for the Metropolitan Opera either, which lumbered on with two more installments of Robert Lepage's lamentable production of the "Ring." But I'll go against the critical tide and put in a good word for Michael Grandage's "Don Giovanni", which struck an apt balance between comedy and drama and had felicitous details of directing. It came closer to the opera's spirit than Robert Carsen's brilliant but cynical production for La Scala, conducted with stately grandeur by Daniel Barenboim.

At the Bayreuth Festival, Sebastian Baumgarten's radical staging of "Tannhäuser", set in a chemical factory, went sadly off-course but typified the far-out aesthetic now prevailing at the Wagner shrine. Christof Loy's Salzburg Festival production of "Die Frau ohne Schatten" was also a flop of Regietheater, although the opera was superbly conducted by Christian Thielemann. At least Salzburg balanced "Frau" with a strong, level-headed production of Verdi's "Macbeth" by Peter Stein, with Riccardo Muti on the podium.

But the Stein production that grabbed me was Shostakovich's "The Nose" at the Zurich Opera House. Though I liked William Kentridge's Met production of this rather hyper opera, Stein put a premium on lucidity, as if in answer to objections of critics who found Kentridge's staging distractingly elaborate.

Another Russian opera to flourish was "Eugene Onegin" in a production by Deborah Warner at the English National Opera. Coming after travesties like Stefan Herheim's take on the Tchaikovsky opera for the Netherlands Opera, it was refreshing to find the work's powerful emotional content taken at face value. Happily, this is a co-production with the Met.

Pre-Mozart opera thrives in Europe in a way American aficionados can only dream of, but the Santa Fe opera championed Vivaldi's "Griselda" with rewarding results in a Peter Sellars staging. Traetta's "Antigona", however, directed by Vera Nemirova and conducted by René Jacobs at the Berlin Staatsoper emerged as a stronger work. And who could resist the Opéra Comique's loving recreation (later seen at BAM and elsewhere) of Jean-Marie Villégier's quarter-century-old staging of Lully's "Atys", with William Christie and Les Arts Florissants again doing the musical honors?

Mark-Anthony Turnage's "Anna Nicole" (which I missed) got more attention, but Peter Maxwell Davies' "Kommilitonen!" about the power of youth, seen at Juilliard in essentially the David Pountney production of its London premiere, was the year's best new opera.

The weakest was Steven Schwartz's "Séance on a Wet Afternoon" at the City Opera, not because it straddled Broadway and opera styles but because it mistakenly presumed that opera should be inflated and grandiose.

Both Santa Fe and the Opera Theatre of Saint Louis successfully went to bat on behalf of two 20th-century scores, respectively, Menotti's "The Last Savage" and John Adams' "The Death of Klinghoffer". But the now defunct Opera Boston really hit home with Hindemith's fascinating "Cardillac" staged by Nicholas Muni.

Two neglected 19th-century operas also made striking impressions. At the Salzburg Whitsun Festival Mercadante's "I due Figaro" under Muti's leadership emerged as a terrific piece, one that might actually hold its own with "Il Barbiere di Siviglia" and "Le Nozze di Figaro" in a trilogy of Beaumarchais operas. At Brussels' La Monnaie, Meyerbeer's "Les Huguenots" was lavishly staged by Olivier Py and conducted with real commitment by Marc Minkowski.

Anna Netrebko demonstrated why she is today's most sought after soprano with ravishing performances of "Anna Bolena" in Vienna and New York, even if neither production showed the opera at its best.

Italy too is having problems funding opera, a situation Muti famously addressed during performances of "Nabucco" in Rome. **But the Teatro Regio in Turin went one better with a "Vespri Siciliani" fervently conducted by Gianandrea Noseda that, in Davide Livermore's ingenious production commemorating the 150th anniversary of Italian unification, tried to depict what the country had become under Silvio Berlusconi.**

Money was apparently no object in the lavish renovation of Moscow's Bolshoi Theater, and its first production, Glinka's "Ruslan and Ludmila" staged by Dmitry Tcherniakov and conducted by Vladimir Jurowski, was a winner, even if its risqué elements scandalized Russian audiences and critics.

And to end on an orchestral note, the Mariinsky Theater, the Bolshoi's rival to the north, made its mark in Carnegie Hall with a magisterial survey of all the Tchaikovsky symphonies led by Valery Gergiev.

Top 10 musical events of 2011 (in chronological order):

"Cardillac" - Opera Boston

"I Vespri Siciliani" - Teatro Regio, Turin

"Atys" - Opéra Comique, Paris

"I Due Figaro" - Salzburg Whitsun Festival

"Les Huguenots" - La Monnaie, Brussels

"The Nose" - Zurich Opera House

All Tchaikovsky Symphonies, Mariinsky Orchestra, Valery Gergiev - Carnegie Hall, New York

"Ruslan and Lyudmila" - Bolshoi Theater, Moscow

"Eugene Onegin" - English National Opera, London

"Kommilitonen!" - The Juilliard School, New York