

Classical New York 2.0

Julian Sachs (November 01, 2010)



For our first piece of this season, the ups and downs of the first month of operas at the Met. Plus, what we can look forward to in November.

On September 27 the 2010-2011 [Metropolitan Opera](#) [2] season began with a new production of Richard Wagner's *Das Rheingold*. The following night the Teutonic fogs were dispelled by the reprise of last season's production of Offenbach's *Les Contes d'Hoffmann*. Twenty-one hours later the audience was present for Verdi's *Rigoletto*. Less than two weeks went by and a new production of Mussorgsky's *Boris Godunov* premiered, followed five days later by Zeffirelli's immortal production of Puccini's *La Bohème*.

Such a contrasting and multi-flavored operatic feast is enough to give any critic indigestion, so what follows is a few glimpses at the ups and downs of these five productions of early 2010.

UP: James Levine, the singers, and his orchestra, *Das Rheingold*.

This season is in his honor, because it marks the 40th anniversary of his Met debut, and 35th from his appointment as Music Director. Under his guide the orchestra always sounds better, and the general improvement in quality over the years has been felt by every assiduous Met-goer, resulting in the Met orchestra becoming arguably the best opera-house orchestra in the world. For this production, he chose an excellent cast, headed by Bryn Terfel as Wotan, and starring a terrific [Eric Owens](#) [3] as Alberich.

Wagner is one of Maestro Levine's specialties and he certainly didn't let the audience down. In spite of his recent health problems and increasing frailty, the raw power of the German composer's first in his series of four mythological operas was flawlessly unleashed.

DOWN: Robert Lepage, director, *Das Rheingold*.

Much ado about nothing, relatively speaking. Many things were said about this new production during the months leading up to its premiere, mainly about a new astounding technology and machinery so heavy that the actual stage had to be reinforced, and about its very high cost. In the end what the public saw was a pretty dull and not that astounding spectacle. Yes, the first scene is impressive, when the Rhinemaidens sing immersed in the projected waters of the Rhine and are confronted by the dwarf Alberich (while the beautiful but noisy machinery revolves), but nothing interesting really ever happens after that, resulting in the narrative being dragged out. And of the four operas, this is the short one! How is it possible that so much work was put in to a backdrop to allow the director to completely forget about the actual singers, left alone on the empty stage, according to the good old "park and bark" fashion?

UP: Bartlett Sher, Ildar Abdrazakov and [Giuseppe Filianoti](#) [4], *Les Contes d'Hoffmann*.

Although non-traditional, Bartlett Sher's 2009 production

of Offenbach's most famous opera is truly a delight. The slanted stage offers literally a new perspective of the action (although it must be challenging for the many dancers) and the minimal but thought-out sets by Michael Yeargan create the right kind of atmosphere and give birth to splendid transitions, especially when moving in and out of Hoffmann's three stories. We are certainly looking forward to Sher's upcoming production of Rossini's *Le Comte Ory* in the spring. In the title role, Giuseppe Filianoti, born in Reggio Calabria, was convincing and both funny and pitiable when required. He will be back in the spring, as the Duke in *Rigoletto*. As the Four Villains, Ildar Abdrazakov was really terrific. His singing was really top quality and every entrance he made was spine-chilling. Not surprising for someone who did so well at the Metropolitan as Attila and Méphistophélès.

UP: The new production of Boris Godunov.

Mussorgsky's massive opera is far from an easy listen, and this year the Metropolitan decided to put it on stage in its longest possible form, including the "Polish" Act, and even other parts of the opera that the composer had cut at some point or other of his life. It was worrying when it was announced that director Peter Stein had withdrawn just a few weeks before rehearsals and that General Manager [Peter Gelb](#) [5] had replaced him with Stephen Wadsworth. But this isn't felt when one sees the production, which will be reprised again in the spring. It is simple and very powerful. The constant opening and closing of spaces perfectly captures the interior struggles of the protagonist and of his country. The sets and costumes are beautiful and are the necessary frame to a terrific performance by [René Pape](#) [6] in the difficult title role. Valery Gergiev leads from the pit and tenor Aleksandrs Antonenko sings the role of Dimitri. Born in Riga, Latvia, he has been chosen by [Riccardo Muti](#) [7] for the title role of Verdi's *Otello*, in Chicago, which will be performed in New York at [Carnegie Hall](#) [8] in April 2011.

DOWN: *Rigoletto*.

It is really sad to see the state of the popular Italian repertoire in such a temple of quality as the Met. We have reached the point where the public will love it even if it is lousy, and it seems to me that they aren't even trying, anymore. As an atheist, Verdi probably didn't believe in an afterlife so it is hard to imagine him turning around in his grave while one of his most moving dramas is turned into a band parade of mediocre singing. Georgian baritone [George Gagnidze](#) [9] did not fill the title role, while German soprano [Christine Schäfer](#) [10] did not even seem like the right voice for Gilda (a part that requires both Spinto and Belcanto abilities). Some relief was provided by the few minutes of



Mezzo-soprano [Nino Surguladze](#) [11] as Maddalena, and Italian tenor Francesco Meli had some good moments, as well, as the Duke. Otto Schenk's worn out production is dramatically effective, but the sets by Zack Brown, although beautiful, really don't nail the Mantuan atmospheres that Verdi probably intended.

UP: Rising stars in La Bohème.

An even bigger hit than Rigoletto, Franco Zeffirelli's production of Puccini's La Bohème is performed every season, over and over again, and seems to never tire the public. It is almost impossible to find a seat, even for members of the press, so I am incapacitated to review it, but I can point out that almost the entire cast performing the opera during these weeks was made up of young performers debuting at the Met (with the illustrious exception of soprano [Maija Kovalevska](#) [12]). Of these, the one who gained the most attention was tenor [Vittorio Grigolo](#) [13] as Rodolfo, but also debuting were conductor [Roberto Rizzi Brignoli](#) [14], soprano [Takesha Meshé Kizart](#) [15], and baritone Fabio Capitanucci. These three were present at [Casa Italiana Zerilli-Marimò](#) [16] at the New York University on October 29 as part of the series Adventures in Italian Opera with Fred Plotkin.

ITALIAN PERFORMANCES

November 2010

November will be an Italian month at the Met, with reprises of old productions of Donizetti's Don Pasquale, Verdi's Il Trovatore, Mozart's Così Fan Tutte (by all means an Italian opera), more performances of La Bohème, and a new production of Verdi's Don Carlo, starring Roberto Alagna, and featuring bass [Ferruccio Furlanetto](#) [17] as King Philip II. Furlanetto will also be speaking about Italian opera with Fred Plotkin at NYU's Casa Italiana Zerilli-Marimò on November 30, 2010. Conductor Marco Armiliato and soprano Maija Kovalevska will be performing with the NYU Symphony at NYU's Skirball Center in honor of Casa Italiana's 20th anniversary on November 4.

At Carnegie Hall another important Italian debut will be taking place: on November 5, pianist and conductor [Stefano Miceli](#) [18] will be leading his Leipzig Philharmonic Orchestra in works by Rossini, Wagner and Piazzolla.

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