

What to add, at this stage, about Devia? Since she says her retirement is from the operatic, not the concert platform, and since she is an immensely polished concert singer (of Schubert, Chopin and Mahler songs as well as Rossini, Bellini and Verdi), the loss will not be total. Nevertheless, it is great. My own sense, above all during long stretches of Act 2, was that her Norma was here offering a sustained demonstration of artistry of the highest, noblest, rarest kind: not lacking in ‘go’, attack or readiness to exult in the role’s bravura moments, the freely emitted high notes and phrases, but putting all her exquisitely mature musicianly skills and bel canto sensibilities at the service of the score, the character, the company and the occasion. It was a glorious achievement, and thus a perfectly fitting farewell.

MAX LOPPERT

## Netherlands

### Amsterdam

Prima la musica e poi ... la musica. It would be silly to pretend that people ever do *Les Contes d’Hoffmann* for any reason other than its often scintillating score—whatever the musical edition. So the question posed by this new production by DUTCH NATIONAL OPERA at the HOLLAND FESTIVAL is whether a staging that treats the drama with cutting-edge seriousness does any harm to the music, and on June 11 the answer seemed both yes and no. Tobias Kratzer’s production defined itself through Rainer Sellmaier’s brilliant set, a proscenium-filling doll’s house that was constantly revealing extra rooms. Virtually trapped in the set’s central cell, a modern room that might have been in Hoffmann’s university residence, Hoffmann and his Muse (there was no Nicklausse) remained in the here and now while the action around them in the Olympia, Antonia and Giulietta acts travelled back in time, each period clearly evoked in Sellmaier’s costumes. But the physical isolation of these central protagonists meant that in many ensembles the singers were not only far apart but could not even see each other—for example, the climactic central-act trio found Antonia, Dr Miracle and the Ghost of Antonia’s Mother (personified in an old gramophone) all sounding from different parts of the set, high above the orchestra. Conversely the chorus was sometimes cramped into small basement spaces where most of its members can have had little chance of seeing the conductor, Carlo Rizzi.

That’s when the chorus was visible: not just the ghostly Weinchor but the students too sang offstage and unseen during the Prologue, and their absence at first looked like the sure sign of a director who didn’t know what to do with them. But as the staging unfolded, its logic—including this handling of the chorus—was revealed. Since everyone was a ghost from Hoffmann’s past, it followed that he was largely cut off and unable to see them. The student drinkers had to come to Hoffmann’s room, rather than find him in the tavern, and within these confined surroundings Kratzer’s action took on an almost expressionist intensity.

Little wonder that Rizzi adopted a safety-first tempo in the Kleinzach song, for instance, but he held everyone—no matter how far and wide they were scattered—together with a sure hand. He also ensured that the lyrical warmth of Offenbach’s inspiration came through, and if some initial numbers had seemed on the steady side, there was no hanging about in the Giulietta act, which for once didn’t drag. The Rotterdam Philharmonic played with panache for Rizzi.

This production boasted an excellent cast. John Osborn’s Hoffmann also displayed some caution, understandably perhaps, where excitement was called for, but he sang with



■ Tobias Kratzer’s new production of ‘*Les Contes d’Hoffmann*’ at the Holland Festival, with (l. to r.) Ermonela Jaho (Antonia), Irene Roberts (Muse), John Osborn (Hoffmann) and Erwin Schrott (Dr Miracle)

even tone and sweetness at the top. More in the limelight than usual, this Muse deserved it: Irene Roberts’s mezzo sounded rich and smooth, and never faltered in her stage presence throughout the long evening. The waif-like Olympia—imprisoned in a 1930s orphanage full of undernourished girls—was taken in full voice by Nina Minasyan. Travelling back to the Victorian era, Antonia received a typically intense and committed performance from Ermonela Jaho, whose distinctively tangy timbre made her the best of the female leads. By contrast, Christine Rice’s Giulietta looked like Amy Winehouse’s peroxidized cousin and sounded a little blousy for Offenbach’s expressive lines. One of Kratzer’s most impressive achievements was to draw powerful performances from Erwin Schrott as the villains—looking suave and acting with intense seriousness, he waited until the curtain calls to lapse back into his natural vulgarity, and he sang with dark power. Schrott even agreed to drop the inauthentic ‘Scintille, diamant’, which not many star baritones would readily give up. In the high tenor roles, Sunnyboy Dladla was perhaps most idiomatic of all the cast; despite his strong Rossinian credentials, he commands a true French sound. Fulfilling smaller duties, Paul Gay and François Lis were both impressive. There was no Stella in this version, but her lines were shared by the three heroines in the epilogue, a satisfying solution that made—yes—musical and dramatic sense.

JOHN ALLISON

## South Africa

### Johannesburg

In Soweto, South Africa’s best-known township, at the end of May you could easily have mistaken the MEADOWLANDS SEVENTH DAY ADVENTIST CHURCH for a building site. The large red-brick church was still under construction; but step around the scaffolding, past the heaps of bricks, and into the main hall, and you were transported into another world.



■ *Umculo's staging of Bach's St John Passion, with Siyabonga Maqungo and Monica Mhangwana*

It was dark inside and there were black and white photographs and videos projected onto the walls of the high-ceilinged church. The audience surrounded the orchestra, with aisles for the singers to pass through with their flashlights. As we turned our heads to follow the characters, the experience became increasingly immersive. For the first time in South Africa, a Bach oratorio—the *St John Passion*—was coming to life as a dramatization.

For UMCULO's *PASSION*, the director Kobie van Rensburg teamed up with the German conductor Felix Bender. Five choirs from diverse communities were brought together to sing the chorales. Each choir had its own texture, which separated each chorale from the next, so that our ears were continuously experiencing something new and different. They joined the soloists, a *turba ripieno* ensemble (professionals and students singing the full choruses, with up to four voices per part), and an orchestra playing period instruments at Baroque pitch. This created a dynamic range to rival an IMAX theatre, with fortissimos great enough to make your stomach jump and silences that were deafeningly loud.

The role of the Evangelist was shared for the three performances (May 25-27) between Siyabonga Maqungo and Albertus Engelbrecht, each singing the tenor arias on the night on which the other performed the recitatives, each bringing his own personality and flavour to this pivotal part. Maqungo's approach to the recitatives—now patient and controlled, now urgent—never allowed us to become comfortable, ensuring our engagement with the story. Engelbrecht's elegant, measured style was the perfect contrast to this. Stephen Schalkwyk—wearing a crown of cable ties, or being stoned with crumpled pieces of paper—played the part of Jesus with dignity. As Pontius Pilate, Ronald Melato brought a note of darkness, creating a fine balance with Schalkwyk's luminous presence.

Bender was himself a child chorister at St Thomas's, Leipzig, and his expertise in Bach's style was evident. The orchestra under his baton created a cushion of support for the soloists, allowing them freedom and comfort in the recitatives and arias. The timbres of the flutes, lute and Baroque oboe brought out the intended *affekt* of each aria. For the final chorus, all five choirs joined the central *turba* ensemble—some 170 singers in all. It was a moment of great emotion, a truly grand finale, owing not only to the sheer volume but also to the careful treatment of each phrase.

The *St John Passion* is a work of profound empathy, as relevant today as in 1724, the year it was written. It speaks to today's South African audience whether or not they are familiar with this particular work. Bach, however, requires no introduction to the townships of South Africa: his hymn melodies and chorales have been a part of life in churches and schools for more than a century. The use of surtitles for this performance,

in both English and Zulu, brought the work even closer to the local audience. In a nation that still carries strong remnants of its bitter division, a project such as this creates opportunity for healing, and adds another brick towards building the unity the country so craves.

ISHA RANCHOD

## Spain

### Bilbao

'Where is God?' read a sign in Basque at the beginning of the Bach *St John Passion* that Calixto Bieito staged at the TEATRO ARRIAGA (April 14), where he has been the artistic director since 2016. How can God be found in this intensely human journey through pain, rage, betrayal, sacrifice, death and, ultimately, redemption? There is probably no answer but the Catalan director offered an enthralling production, and a glimmer of hope. Within Aída-Leonor Guardia's neutral set and Ingo Krügler's everyday costumes, Bieito presented a series of disturbing scenes, taking their cue from the text—the obsession with blood in 'Von den Stricken', the remorse of Peter and the violent response of the crowd. The suffering of Jesus, sung by the youthful but vocally mature baritone James Newby, and his relationship with Mary Magdalene (the clean-sounding soprano Berit Norbakken Solset) was the focal point, but the individual tragedy became collective when, during 'Es ist vollbracht', heartbreakingly performed by the Basque countertenor Carlos Mena, the singer led the members of the Bilbao Opera Chorus one by one towards a common grave. Jesus himself was buried beneath stones, but in the last affirmative chorale, a pregnant woman appeared, a sign of rebirth smiled on approvingly by Mary.

As always, Bieito inspired astonishing levels of commitment from his cast, which also included Joshua Ellicott as the Evangelist, the tenor Robert Murray and the bass Jonathan McGovern. Erik Nielsen's tempos were sometimes on the slow side but he drew a good sound from the Bilbao Symphony Orchestra.

XAVIER CESTER

## Switzerland

### Basel

Prokofiev wrote *The Gambler* in 1917, but this staging by THEATER BASEL (March 16) constituted its first Swiss performance. The director Vasily Barkhatov took the view that today's obsessive gamblers stalk the internet rather than casinos and exploit its global nature to bypass national controls. Accordingly, he moved the action to the present day and for the first quarter-hour of the show tried almost embarrassingly hard to defy any expectations that the audience might have had. The entire first scene took place in the laundry of a block of flats where Alexey perched on top of a washing machine, playing on his MacBook Pro (at times one wondered whether the opera house had struck a product placement deal with Apple). In front of the building was a German-style bus shelter where Polina met the Marquis; he was out jogging before going to buy drugs from the General's son, a tattooed, green-haired teenager whose T-shirt carried the name of the heavy metal band Slipknot. The General appeared to be a bus conductor, but he was also seen cooking in his Ikea-furnished flat while Baron Würmerhelm, carrying his golf clubs, inexplicably put a leaflet through every letterbox in the building.