

A week of contrasts

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The Royal Opera House is like Mary Poppins' handbag: anything can come out of it. In the space of twenty-four hours, one can go to Covent Garden to see the most conventional production of Puccini's *La Fanciulla del West* imaginable and the most outrageously kitsch production of Cavalli's *La Calisto* - and both are good.

Piero Faggioni's production of *La Fanciulla* (premiered here in 1977) stays true to the tradition of the opera by setting the action in the mountains of America's Far West. In so doing, Faggioni stresses the link between the plot and its landscape. Indeed, it would be difficult for the action of *La Fanciulla* to take place anywhere else; the character of Minnie, in particular, is inseparable from the drama's geographical context. In his seminal book *Landscape and Gender in Italian Opera*, Emanuele Senici discusses the generic link between the representation of virginity and mountainous landscapes. In his chapter of *La Fanciulla* he refers to Minnie as a character whose personality stems from the combination of purity (manifested by the fact that the soprano, who lives in a hut in the mountains, has never been kissed) and roughness (which comes with her being the owner of a tavern frequented by gold miners). Which other pious (operatic) virgin would have the guts to aim her gun at the sheriff to prevent his advances? A director faced with the challenge of putting on *La Fanciulla* would therefore take a risk in not sticking with tradition: it might be possible to do a good *La Fanciulla* outside the Far West, but removing Minnie from her context could come at the price of rendering the character impossible to understand.



Westbroek como Minnie
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La Calisto, on the other hand, has no tradition, which means that audiences have no particular expectations. Like many pre-modern operas, it was not performed between its premiere and the late twentieth century, and, written in the *seicento*, its characters and situazioni are very far removed from modern sensibilities. David Alden is right in updating the drama by turning it into a kitsch show, which takes the original libretto with a huge pinch of salt. In his production, premiered in Munich in 2005, the action takes place in the

twentieth century, partly in a bar, partly in the luxurious lobby of a hotel (or skyscraper). Alden's heavily sexual production was visually seductive and effectively executed, and one can easily guess that the meticulously planned movement of the singers on stage was the result of much strenuous rehearsal. Unfortunately, *La Fanciulla*'s revival showed the lack thereof.

While such different dramatic concepts worked equally well, the musical side of both performances was not quite so balanced. The exception was the conducting. In both cases the conductors succeeded in holding the reins tight and giving us all a good ride.

Conducting *La Fanciulla*, Antonio Pappano was particularly good at making the first act attractive - not an easy task, since it is sometimes difficult for the audience to sustain their concentration on a seemingly unimportant succession of songs and events. They are important, however, to understand the relationship between Minnie and the miners, which later proves crucial in grasping why they help her out in Act Three. Pappano worked wonders in the pit and kept us fixed in our seats. In *La Calisto*, Ivor Bolton can be credited for the same: he worked hard with the Orchestra of the Age of Enlightenment (which plays original instruments) to make the often dry recitatives sound nuanced and meaningful, while effectively accompanying the singers.

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José Cura y Eva-Maria Westbroek

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Unfortunately, the singing of *La Fanciulla* - by Covent Garden's own standards at least - was as bad as it gets. As Minnie, Eva-Maria Westbroek took some time to warm up. Even though she eventually showed us her bronzed timbre and gave a good enough rendition of the role, her intonation was not quite there for most part of the opera. José Cura, singing Dick Johnson, did much better five years ago. This time he was barely audible when he sang piano and not particularly seductive when he sang the only aria of the opera, 'Ch'ella mi creda libero e lontano'. Cura is not generally a subtle singer, but this is one of the roles he usually sings best. Shame he was not at the top of his game. Silvano Carroli was much worse as Jack Rance, to the point where I suspected he was ill. Obvious intonation problems, poor phrasing and static acting made for a surprisingly weak performance.

The singing of *La Calisto*, on the other hand, was very good indeed. Veronique Gens' first return to the Royal Opera since her 1995 debut was duly rewarded with a sonorous ovation. On a par with her were Lawrence Zazzo, the warmly-voiced countertenor who sang Endimione, Joao Fernandes as Giove, Monica Bacelli as Diana and the always hilarious Dominique Visse and Guy de Mey. But the singer who stole the show was Sally Matthews in the leading role. Both her acting and her singing were stunning. Vocally and dramatically, she perfectly negotiated the evolution of Calisto from prudish virgin to lustful woman in love and then victim of the capricious will of the gods. This dependable singer stretched herself and offered a memorable performance.

All in all, this enjoyable week at Covent Garden was an antidote to operatic dogmatism. Both modern and traditional performances showed, once more, that they can fruitfully co-exist in the same season and be equally valid. Opera is, after all, a circus, one filled with more debauchery and less etiquette than most believe. A real treat.

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