

## *Si, mi chiamano Manon*

DITLEV RINDOM

For an opera with so many ‘greatest hits’, *Manon* has been surprisingly neglected at Covent Garden in recent years. The last new production was in 1987 and that hasn’t been revived since 1994. Antonio Pappano did, of course, make a memorable recording in the early 2000s with Gheorghiu and Alagna, and it was presumably his enthusiasm that prompted this staging, intended to star the new opera couple Netrebko and Villazon. The latter dropped out months in advance, and was quickly replaced by Vittorio Grigolo, who based upon his performance in London may soon fill Villazon’s shoes as the hysterical tenor of our times.

Laurent Pelly’s production is an unexpectedly low-key affair: indeed, for someone so acclaimed his for witty, colourful spectacles, it is striking quite how minimalistic and grey the staging actually is. Loosely updated to the *Belle Époque*, the first act relies upon a series of panels to evoke the rooftops of Paris amidst an otherwise bare stage; the second act uses a small model house to evoke the lovers’ bohemian grotto, a decision which

paradoxically makes the stage seem bigger rather than smaller. Even in the grander public scenes of acts three and four, Pelly appears to rely upon a mass of moving people and a few glamorous costumes to evoke a sense a grandeur, and it is really only in the final scene at Le Havre that the aesthetic seems to lock in to place. Surrounded by grey walls which conjure up the receding harbour, the open spaces effectively work to suggest the feelings of loneliness and desolation which mark the lovers’ farewell. I wonder how the production will fare with a less high-profile cast.

The title role made an obvious vehicle for international celebrity and (as the programme reminded us) Chopard diva Anna Netrebko. As with all her previous performances at Covent Garden, she re-confirmed my impression of a fantastic voice allied to somewhat inconsistent communication skills. Her high lyric voice sailed easily through the score’s technical hurdles, nailed the part’s numerous top D’s and gave ample evidence of her glowing timbre with its dark Slavic tang. In terms of expression, though, things were more

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**Londres, viernes,  
25 de junio de  
2010.** The Royal  
Opera House,  
Covent Garden.  
Jules Massenet,  
*Manon*. Laurent



Manon Lescaut

Pelly, Director. Agathe Melinand,  
Dramaturg. Chantal Thomas, Set designs.  
Laurent Pelly & Jean-Jacques Delmotte,  
Costumes. Joel Adam, Lighting. Lionel  
Hoche, Choreography. Anna Netrebko  
(*Manon Lescaut*), Vittorio Grigolo (*Des  
Grieux*), Christof Fischesser (*Le Comte  
Des Grieux*), Russell Braun (*Lescaut*),  
Christophe Mortagne (*Guillot de  
Morfortaine*), William Shimell (*De  
Bretigny*), Simona Mihai (*Poussette*),  
Louise Innes (*Javotte*), Kai Ruutel  
(*Rosette*), Lynton Black (*Housekeeper*),  
Elliot Goldie & Donaldson Bell (*Two  
guardsmen*). Orchestra and Chorus of the  
Royal Opera House, Covent Garden.  
Renato Balsadonna, Chorus director.  
Antonio Pappano, Conductor

varied: she got off to an unmemorable start and even in 'Adieu, notre petite table' she failed really to register the music's deep pathos and the character's conflicting emotions in the preceding recitative. Her performance improved notably in the later acts, with extrovert performances of the gavotte and the love duet at St Sulpice (an appropriately torrid affair), and the death scene was movingly done with faded tone. And yet...I can't escape the feeling that the interpretation wasn't truly internalized: her poor French set up an immediate expressive barrier, and her slightly limited range of vocal colour meant that you were left with impression of someone singing gloriously rather than delivering heightened speech. The audience loved her, though.

Enthusiasm was perhaps even greater for Grigolo, who from this reception looks set to become a star. He certainly possesses the holy trinity of a fine voice, good looks and stage confidence, and his chemistry with Netrebko was sizzling and terrific. As I've already intimated, though, he is a performer of extremes, and personally I look forward to him learning how to connect the dots. His interpretation of Des Grieux was very much the infatuated adolescent rather than the tormented adult, and his vocal style alternated between fortissimo cries and *pianissimo* sobs, often within a single phrase, in a manner more associated with Italian verismo than French *opéra comique*. His two big arias were suavely delivered and he coped well with the stamina demands of the part, even if you sensed it was very much at his outer limit at present. If he can learn to vary his expressive range and develop a vocal palette beyond ceaseless intensity, he could well justify his marketing as the next Italian tenor.

The smaller roles in *Manon* are rarely show-stealing, but the high level of dialogue means they do much to establish the overall tone of the performance. They were here taken by an accomplished ensemble team, and maintained the very solid standard of the show. As the three tarts, Simona Mihai, Louise Innes and Kai Rüütel were suitably vamp-like and sang their scenes with tonal refinement. Lescaut and the Comte were well delivered by Russell Braun and Christof Fischesser, and ...William Schimell offered a persuasive De Brétigny. Given Covent Garden's decision not to cut the (seemingly interminable) ballet, though, it was odd that they didn't seek a more imaginative choreography: given the quality of the dancing in *The Tsarina's Slippers*, this was a curious let-down.

Antonio Pappano directed a lush, sensitively balanced and very Italianate rendition of the score which made liberal use of rubato and indulged his soloists' numerous expressive quirks. As with his concurrent performances of *Simon Boccanegra*, his attention to details of voicing and orchestral colour were marvellous and set the seal on a performance that aimed for unbridled passion rather than sentimentality. As a whole, the production wasn't quite the five-star success we were all hoping for, but it wasn't a wash-out either. On this showing, I await the revival with curiosity.