

## *The Tides of Political Fortune*

JESSE SIMON

Even by Verdian standards, *Simon Boccanegra* can claim a plot of unusual complexity, in which the usual forces of love, family and patriotic duty are set against an exactingly-devised backdrop of double-crosses, abductions and surprise paternity reveals that can make the arcane mechanics of political succession in fourteenth-century Genoa seem relatively straightforward. For the new production at the Deutsche Oper, director Vasily Barkhatov was able to render the complexities of the story with absolute clarity while also introducing ideas of his own that took the action in unexpected directions. With a strong central quartet of singers and high-calibre musical direction from Jader Bignamini, the evening succeeded equally as a compelling entertainment and an engaging performance of one of Verdi's most accomplished scores.

Barkhatov, Simon  
Boccanegra  
© 2023 by Bettina  
Stöss

**Berlín, domingo,  
29 de enero de  
2023.** Deutsche  
Oper Berlin. Verdi:  
Simon  
Boccanegra.



Vasily Barkhatov, director. George Petean (Simon Boccanegra). Liang Li (Jacopo Fiesco). Michael Bachtadze (Paolo Albiani). Padraic Rowan (Pietro). Maria Motolygina (Maria / Amelia). Attilio Glaser (Gabriele Adorno). Patrick Cook (Captain). Karis Tucker (A Maid). Choir and Orchestra of the Deutsche Oper Berlin. Jader Bignamini, conductor.

Mr Barkhatov's staging updated the action to a recognisably twenty-first century political milieu, albeit one in which Genoa is still ruled by a Doge. Although the production presented the opera in its familiar revised version of 1881, it was prefaced with the less-frequently-performed 'Prelude' to the 1857 version, which allowed Mr Barkhatov a few extra minutes to construct his narrative universe. In the opening moments Mr Barkhatov showed us the first happy days of Fiesco's rule – some fifteen years before the events of the Prologue – and in doing so introduced one of the staging's central themes: the endless oscillation of public opinion from which political fortune is made and lost again.

Despite its modernised setting, the staging remained close to the events of the libretto; where it differed most decisively was in its treatment of Maria/Amelia. During the set change between the Prologue and the first act, a news report – complete with newspaper headlines projected onto the curtain – suggested that Simone's two-decade search to find his missing daughter had taken a considerable mental toll; not only was it affecting his competence as a statesman, but it was implied that his judgment was so clouded that he was willing to be (and perhaps already had been) taken in by pretenders.

When Simone first encounters Amelia – in the girls' boarding school run by Fiesco – the two appear to share a moment of kinship when Simone learns of the her upbringing by the



Verdi: Simon Boccanegra. Vasily Barkhatov, director. Jader Bignamini, conductor. Deutsche Oper Berlin, January 2023. © 2023 by Bettina Stöss.

sea. Yet the scene is soon revealed to have taken place entirely within Simone's head. Part of the council chamber scene and the scene with Simone and Amelia in the second act are shown to be similarly fictional, projections of Simone's longing that may or may not be tethered to reality. (Mr Barkhatov achieved this effect by introducing a rough edged video projection background to the scenes in question, each of which ended with a sudden fade to black; a series of thin white lights at the front of the stage served to "rewind" the action, and when the stage lights came on again we found ourselves in the exact moment at which we had departed from reality).

While these departures did not interrupt the flow of the action (or music), they introduced an ambiguity essential to Mr Barkhatov's vision of the story. Not only did it cause Simone's decisions to seem unfathomable to those around him, it also denied the audience a reliable vantage point from which to judge Amelia's character. Until the very final scenes it remained unclear if she was actually Simone's missing daughter or part of an elaborate scam designed to elevate Adorno to power. Mr Barkhatov compounded these ambiguities by creating characters who were distinctive enough to be plausible but remained largely opaque. We could be sure of Fiesco's hatred for Simone, Amelia and Adorno's mutual desire, and Paolo's self-serving smugness, but little else.

If there was a great uncertainty at the heart of the staging, Mr Barkhatov nonetheless rendered the contours of the drama with considerable skill. Individual scenes were rich in well-observed incidental detail while retaining a sharp focus on the story's constant fluctuations of allegiance. Admittedly some of the opera's more action-oriented moments – the arrival of the crowd in the council chamber or Adorno's attempt to assassinate Simone – felt a shade understated, but the smaller encounters that make up the bulk of the opera were rarely less than compelling.

If there was no one vocal performance that dominated the evening, the well-balanced cast ensured a near constant sequence of excellent ensemble scenes. As the title character, George Petean had a voice that could sound heavy in the lowest notes, but gained considerably in warmth, agility and feeling in the higher-lying passages that feature in many of Simone's best scenes. Although the decision of the staging to play the character as a career politician of declining judgement somewhat undercut the cathartic magnanimity of the council chamber scene, Mr Petean nonetheless delivered an impassioned address to the assembled political forces of Genoa. However the dramatic potential in his voice was better showcased in his initial pleas for reconciliation with Fiesco, his sensitive first meeting with Amelia, and his agonised final moments, in which the effect of the poison was subtly articulated in both his vocal and physical performance.



Verdi: Simon Boccanegra. Vasily Barkhatov, director. Jader Bignamini, conductor. Deutsche Oper Berlin, January 2023. © 2023 by Bettina Stöss.



Verdi: Simon Boccanegra. Vasily Barkhatov, director. Jader Bignamini, conductor. Deutsche Oper Berlin, January 2023. © 2023 by Bettina Stöss.

There were few more engaging moments in the evening than the two confrontations between Simone and Fiesco that bookend the opera, and the strength of these scenes owed much to the commanding bass of Liang Li. He rarely sought to impress through power alone, but his elegant lines and his ease with the role's lowest passages worked well with the intense severity he brought to the character. As Amelia, Maria Motolygina wielded a voice of great expressive power and considerable tonal breadth; her solo scene at the beginning of the first act was especially enthralling. If there were one or two moments in which the demands of technique seemed to eclipse the evenness of performance, they were outweighed by scenes in which she was the most compelling voice on stage.

Attilio Glaser's Adorno grew in stature throughout the evening. His initial scenes with Amelia, and even his appearance in the council chamber were undeniably well-sung, but they suggested a cautious conspirator far more than a romantic tenor. However in the second act – first in a searching solo scene, then a caustic duet calling Amelia's fidelity into question, and finally as the repentant would-be assassin in the climactic trio – he was able to invest the role with exactly the immediacy and depth it needed. As Paolo, Michael Bachtadze provided the staging with a credible kingmaker turned villain, and the choir, who play such an essential role in the drama, were also on fine form, perhaps nowhere more so than in the Prologue.

Throughout the evening, Jader Bignamini's quietly excellent musical direction seemed less focussed on the score's moments of surprise and dramatic reversal than its lyrical undercurrents of regret and loss. This is not to suggest that the climactic moments were underplayed – the arrival of Amelia in the council chamber and Adorno's discovery of Amelia's true identity were both given appropriate orchestral heft – rather that it was the gentle radiance of the strings in the Prologue, the detailed woodwinds that accompanied Amelia's first appearance, or the sequence of beautifully sculpted scenes that brought the third act to its dark conclusion that made the greatest impression. If Mr Barkhatov's staging made light work of the libretto's complexities, it was Mr Bignamini's unforced but consistently well-judged reading that allowed Verdi's score to flourish.