

Palace Intrigue

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When *Anna Bolena* had its première in 1830 it was Donizetti's first unquestionable operatic triumph; but unlike such later successes as *Lucia di Lammermoor* or *L'Elisir d'Amore*, it has spent the last century on the fringes of the repertoire. Its relative neglect is not perhaps unjustified: while *L'Elisir* can coast on charm and *Lucia* is often able to thrive on the strength of its taut dramatic construction, *Anna Bolena* demands a group of singers whose technical skill and charismatic presence can transcend a sprawling libretto that often flirts with emotional implausibility.

In Federica Lombardi the new production at the Deutsche Oper had exactly the voice it needed to transform the evening into an event, and the strong support of Vasilisa Berzhanskaya and René Barbera (as Giovanna Seymour and Riccardo Percy) allowed scene after scene to sparkle on vocal majesty alone. Although David Alden's staging provided a cohesive visual setting and maintained an almost surprising fidelity to the narrative, it seemed equally content to let the vocal performances drive the drama, resulting in an evening in which the elegance of the singing proved far more persuasive than the psychology of the story.

Mr Alden's staging – assembled originally for the Zürich Opera, where it had its première in late 2021 – wasn't exactly slavish in its adherence to the libretto, but was sparing in its own conceptual additions. While the setting was updated from Tudor England to an unspecified time in the nineteenth or early-twentieth century – judging from the costumes, none of the characters seemed to belong to the same historical era – it was remarkably straightforward in its unfolding of the drama. Mr Alden seemed interested less in recontextualising the action or finding modern resonances than in reducing it to a basic conflict of characters balanced between desire and duty.

The character-focussed approach yielded several impressive scenes – the meeting of Percy and Anna near the end of the first act, or the trio of Percy, Anna and Enrico in the second – but also a handful of baffling moments, most of which arose from Mr Alden's curiously



Alden, *Anna Bolena* © 2023 by Bettina Stöß

Berlin, viernes, 15 de diciembre de 2023. Deutsche Oper Berlin. Donizetti: *Anna Bolena*. David Alden, director. Riccardo Fassi (Enrico VIII), Federica Lombardi (*Anna Bolena*), Vasilisa Berzhanskaya (*Giovanna Seymour*), Padraic Rowan (*Lord Rochefort*), René Barbera (*Lord Percy*), Karis Tucker (*Smeton*), and Chance Jonas-O'Toole (*Sir Hervey*). Choir and Orchestra of the Deutsche Oper Berlin. Enrique Mazzola, conductor



Donizetti: Anna Bolena. Enrique Mazzola, conductor. David Alden, director. Berlin, Deutsche Oper, December 2023. © 2023 by Bettina Stöss.

inconsistent treatment of Enrico. In his first appearance, hanging a painting on the wall and devoting more attention to a stack of books than to his lover, Enrico suggested an irritable academic, petulant and fusty in roughly equal measure; but as the drama developed he seemed to become both more sinister and less tethered to reality — there was a decidedly fetishistic quality in his treatment of Giovanna, although the staging made it difficult to tell if the three black-clad dancers he kept on a leash were merely supposed to represent a pack of hunting dogs. Around the middle of the second act, Mr Alden introduced the intriguing possibility that the whole story was taking place entirely in Enrico's imagination, but the idea never quite came into sharp focus.

Even Mr Alden's more pronounced departures were never so prominent as to unbalance or overwhelm the action. The presence of a young girl – the future Queen Elizabeth – as a silent observer of the palace intrigue was perhaps the staging's most conspicuous addition; but while the idea of the young queen being both traumatised and educated by the cruelty around her could have given the drama an essential through-line, Mr Alden kept it as an incidental detail. The accumulation of such details gave the staging its own unsettled mood, yet one occasionally felt that Mr Alden could have pursued some of his own propositions in greater depth without sacrificing the essential clarity of the action.

Despite the narrative focus and intriguing ideas of the staging, the evening generated its greatest moments of excitement through its principal singers ... and there were few moments as thrilling as the meeting of Federica Lombardi's Anna and Vasilisa Berzhanskaya's Giovanna at the beginning of the second act, a sustained master-class in technical brilliance placed in the service of emotional expression. If Anna's magnanimity and Giovanna's guilt can seem unconvincing on paper, Ms Lombardi and Ms Berzhanskaya transcended any suggestion of implausibility through their extraordinary dynamic control and the subtle shadings of their delivery: the climactic high notes were satisfyingly grand without the slightest hint of excessive force, and the delicate intertwining of the two voices at the end of the scene was a triumphant delight. Yet the quiet resolve of Ms Lombardi, the volatility of Ms Berzhanskaya, and the continually shifting relationship between the two yielded a scene that worked equally well as vocal showpiece and dramatic confrontation.

If the duet was the evening's indisputable high-point, Ms Lombardi remained a compelling force throughout: she was superb in the large ensembles and in moments of vehement exclamation, but when it came to hushed, introspective phrasing she was in a class by herself. Her inwardly-focused opening aria and her pleas for the king's forgiveness in the first act finale were notable for their gentle tone and direct expression; and the solo scene at the conclusion of the second act displayed extraordinary emotional range while retaining its essential poise. But the brilliance of Ms Lombardi's individual scenes was arguably less impressive than her ability to weave



Donizetti: Anna Bolena. Enrique Mazzola, conductor. David Alden, director. Berlin, Deutsche Oper, December 2023. © 2023

dazzling moments into a long view of the character that seemed to grow in stature and regal bearing as the evening progressed.

by Bettina Stöss.

Ms Berzhanskaya also had her share of fine moments, bringing refinement and control to Giovanna's opening aria, underlining the gravity of the situation in the first act duet with Enrico, and pleading with Enrico to spare Anna's life in the second. René Barbera's clear tone and unfailingly graceful phrasing were a perfect fit for Lord Riccardo Percy: if his solo passages were consistently engaging, he was at his best in the scenes of highly-charged drama, notably the first-act duet with Anna, and the trio with Anna and Enrico, which emerged as one of the high-points of the second act. Riccardo Fassi provided the evening with a dark, dangerous Enrico, whose tyrannical behaviour was shaded with the possibility of mental imbalance; and Karis Tucker's Smeton captured the essence of a dreamer forced into a situation beyond their control.

Conductor Enrique Mazzola approached the score with a strong sense of its possibilities and limitations. If the full orchestra often sounded lean and compartmentalised – this was not a performance that attempted to impose unnecessary opulence onto Donizetti's comparatively spare textures – the tight focus and rhythmic exuberance of Mr Mazzola's direction kept the action flowing while creating a sympathetic yet unobtrusive foundation for the series of vocal performances that were, without question, the evening's greatest asset.