

Santa Fe Opera 2: Victorian Delights

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Don Giovanni last appeared on the stage of the Santa Fe Opera in 2016, and while that production was unquestionably entertaining – as *Don Giovanni* so often is – the new production at this year’s summer season was superior in every way: the staging, directed by Stephen Barlow, offered an intriguing transposition of the story from seventeenth-century Seville to Victorian London, but it was the energetic musical direction of Harry Bicket and the dedication of a uniformly strong ensemble cast that kept Mozart’s score at the centre of the evening.

Although *Don Giovanni* continues to flourish in meticulously-realised period stagings, Da Ponte’s libretto – based on a tale which had already received countless retellings since its earliest written appearance in the 1630s – is flexible enough that it can work equally well in all manner of alternative settings. There was an undeniable logic in Mr Barlow’s decision to have the action take place in London at the turn of the last century, not least in its preservation of the story’s class distinctions: Leporello required little alteration to act as *Don Giovanni*’s faithful coachman, and the wedding of Zerlina and Masetto took place, not surprisingly, in a pub. Yet the tidiness with which the story settled into its new locale made the decision seem more of a visual sidestep than a radical reinterpretation of the drama.

Don Giovanni himself, with his top hat and black cloak, cut an undeniably sinister figure and, for a brief moment at the beginning, one wondered if the Victorian trappings of the sets were going to be used to take the story in a Jack the Ripper direction (which would have been disturbing but novel). Mr Barlow, however, had other things on his mind: the Victorian touchstone that inspired his staging was, in fact, *Dorian Gray*, who, in addition to having the same initials as the opera’s title character, shares both his vanity and hedonism. It was an intriguing idea in principle if not always in practice: if Wilde’s gothic fable provided the staging with its memorable opening image of *Don Giovanni* in his study surrounded by portraits of himself, and also offered a satisfyingly logical framework for the



Barlow, *Don Giovanni* © 2024 by Curtis Brown / Santa Fe Opera
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Santa Fe Opera. Mozart: *Don Giovanni*. Stephen Barlow, director. Ryan Speedo Green (*Don Giovanni*), Rachel Willis-Sørensen (*Donna Anna*), Rachael Wilson (*Donna Elvira*), David Portillo (*Don Ottavio*), Nicholas Newton (*Leporello*), Liv Redpath (*Zerlina*), William Guanbo Su (*Masetto*), and Solomon Howard (*Commendatore*). Orchestra of the Santa Fe Opera. Harry Bicket, conductor.

climactic encounter with the Commendatore, most of the action remained rooted firmly within the original text.



Mozart: Don Giovanni. Harry Bicket, conductor. Stephen Barlow, director. Santa Fe Opera 2024. © 2024 by Curtis Brown / Santa Fe Opera.

The staging may have erred on the conservative side in its storytelling, but it was ingeniously conceived as a piece of stagecraft. The set consisted of two very large panels, hinged at the back of the stage, which could be swung to one side or the other revealing the opera's varied locations: the grand hotel where Donna Elvira stayed, Donna Anna's room, the pub where Zerlina and Masetto were to be married, and a succession of nocturnal outdoor spaces; the panels could also be pulled apart, transforming the stage into Don Giovanni's residence, where the conclusions of both acts took place. The fluidity of the stage set-up allowed for pronounced changes of scene without disrupting the flow of the music.

The easy charm of the staging was matched by musical performances of considerable distinction; and, in a nod to historical performance practice, most of the cast were given licence to add their own ornamentation (although they did so sparingly). Ryan Speedo Green had both the vocal and physical presence to establish Don Giovanni at the centre of the action. If the staging kept the character curiously opaque – there was an almost pathological detachment in his first encounter with Donna Elvira and in the later quartet with Donna Anna and Don Ottavio – he could also be dangerously charismatic, as demonstrated in his calculatedly suave contributions to 'Là ci darem'. His 'Fin ch'han dal vino' was lithe and rapid and his climactic confrontation with the Commendatore was pleasingly unrepentant.

Rachel Willis-Sørensen, who had provided the previous evening's *Rosenkavalier* with such a fine Marschallin, was perhaps even more compelling as Donna Anna (Ms Willis-Sørensen was a late replacement for Teresa Perrotta, who had to withdraw from the production). Her first appearance was arresting and the subsequent duet with Don Ottavio offered a volatile mix of grief and rage; her dramatic recounting of Don Giovanni's masked visit to her bed-chamber was followed by a finely-crafted 'Or sai chi l'onore', and the performance culminated in an unusually serene 'Non mi dir' in which nothing was overstated, but each line seemed, in its own way, perfectly judged.



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Liv Redpath was a thoroughly charming Zerlina; if she made her way through the wedding chorus with agility and assurance, it was the graceful melodic phrasing of 'Là ci darem' that made the greater impression; and while 'Batti batti' was full of sly elegance, 'Vedrai carino' was perhaps finer still. The staging seemed oddly uncertain as to whether Donna Elvira should be a serious or comedic presence, and many of her appearances had an overstated manner that could seem at odds with the words; Rachael Wilson embraced the character's more emphatic side in 'Ah, chi mi dice mai', but was more restrained – and

more compelling – in ‘Ah, fuggi’. If Elvira was never allowed to settle down entirely, Ms Wilson’s ‘Mi tradi’ was delivered with a pathos that momentarily transcended the exaggerations of the staging.



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As Don Ottavio, David Portillo – who had also appeared in the previous evening’s *Rosenkavalier* as the Italian Singer – seemed overly earnest and somewhat mannered in his initial duet with Donna Anna, but his two arias were both excellent: ‘Dalla sua pace’, with its measured tempo, was notable for its gentle phrasing, while ‘Il mio tesoro’ combined greater animation with moments of captivating refinement. Nicholas Newton’s firm tone, agile delivery and natural presence yielded a strong Leporello: if ‘Catalogo’ had a few moments that seemed oddly paced, he was especially good in the opera’s opening scene (most notably in the hushed notes that followed the Commendatore’s death), in his attempts to placate everyone in the aftermath of the second act sextet, and in his reluctance to invite the Commendatore for dinner.

The musical direction of Harry Bicket, the Santa Fe Opera’s chief conductor, featured a handful of moments that forced one to acknowledge the beauty of a particular passage – the opening strings in Zerlina’s ‘Batti batti’ were little short of magnificent – but was more notable for its evenness, fine judgment and clarity of expression. The pacing, although generally unhurried, was matched by taut playing that never allowed the drama to lose its essential form (only the first act quartet seemed slower than usual). Most importantly, both the tempi and textures of the orchestra were tailored to the strengths of the singers, allowing the splendour of the music to remain the focal point of the evening.