

Mozart's "La Clemenza di Tito" at the Metropolitan Opera left us with mixed feelings. The performance was very good – there is some great vocal writing, especially in the solo arias, and all of the singers were excellent to spectacular. The heavyweight headliner was mezzo Anne Sofie von Otter, who sang one of the TWO part roles – more on that later. Other singers were sopranos Melanie Diener and Heidi Grant Murphy, tenor Frank Lopardo and mezzo Sarah Connolly – all in truly great voice. James Levine conducted.

The story is yet another in Mozart's cycle of sucking up to the emperor by portraying an all-wise, all-forgiving monarch along the lines of Pasha Selim of "Abduction from the Seraglio" and Sorastro in "Magic Flute." It was commissioned for the coronation of the Austrian emperor as king of Bohemia (today's Czech Republic, then part of the Austrian Empire). It is based on a libretto set to music by many composers in the 18th C., but this particular telling is very convoluted. The lead soprano wants the emperor Titus killed – no wait, she changed her mind – wait again, she upbraids her lover for not killing him yet. Reason – Titus jilted her and chose someone else. But wait, the someone else is spoken for, so the emperor chooses another, then in turn settles on the same lead soprano, who now doesn't want him killed because she fancies the role of empress. Then the insurrection occurs, and the emperor is killed – but wait, false report, he survives and gets to pardon the perps in the act of clemency expressed in the title.

Convoluted stories are not unusual in opera (see Verdi's "Il Trovatore", Wagner's Ring cycle), so that is not the main concern. The least satisfactory element is Mozart's setting of the vocal parts. There are TWO soprano-mezzo pairs of lovers, which makes for very up-scale (frequency-wise) singing. The mezzo parts are scored at the high end of their range, not in the mellow low tones that play off so well against a soprano register (Rosenkavalier, Hoffman) or blend with a tenor (Carmen, Dalila). In the duets, the voices were so close that you had to look to see whose mouth was moving to tell who was singing. On occasion, it sounded as if the sopranos had to hit lower notes than the mezzos. In keeping with the overall high register, there is no bass part, and the role of the wise ruler, in works of this kind usually written for a bass or baritone, is here sung by a tenor.

The staging was not Roman but in 18th-Century costumes of Mozart's time. The set was reminiscent of classic Roman architecture, but with touches that reflected Renaissance neo-classic elements.

There is a new technical feature in the Met opera house – titles are not projected above the stage, but displayed on an LCD screen on the seat-back in front of you. This opens up several exciting possibilities – you can turn off the titles, and perhaps, in the future, a choice of title languages will be offered. (One time at the Warsaw Opera, seeing either Turandot or Nabucco, we struck up a conversation with our neighbor, only to find that he didn't speak either Polish or Italian, so he understood neither the singing nor the titles – he was from Finland. He could have used a pick-your-language option. We communicated in English.) But at this performance, we found the translations somewhat lacking. They were very complete during the recitatives (of which there seemed to be more than in other Mozart operas), which was fine for progressing the exposition of the story line, but the solo arias, which express the innermost thoughts, passions and emotions of the characters, had long stretches without translation. After almost two decades of taking opera titles for granted, their lack was somewhat disconcerting.

Apart from the singers' registers, the music was quite satisfying, but on balance, I did not find this to be one of Mozart's better efforts.

PS. This is the 80th opera we have seen – not the 80th performance, but 80 different operas. We are shooting for 100!