

METROPOLITAN OPERA February 2007

I PURITANI

We saw Bellini's *I Puritani* with Russian superstar Anna Netrebko in the lead soprano role. She is truly amazing! A most pure and unharsh high end, with faultless intonation throughout her range. She used vibrato very sparingly, for effect rather than, as it seems most singers do, to mask inability to maintain pitch. She could float a dead-on unwavering note in any volume, from a delicate *sotto voce* to full volume. One particularly impressive effect: her ability to effortlessly modulate from piano to fortissimo without the "running start" of a toss of the head, throwing of shoulders or visible intake of breath – just as if she cranked a virtual volume control clockwise. The only reservation is that her voice is quite light, not suited to the demands of a dramatic soprano. And it wasn't just Bellini's music that accentuated the lightness – we bought a CD of her singing various arias, and find that she is not quite up to the demands of "Sempre Libera" from Verdi's *Traviata* (written in mазurka rhythm!). Her voice needs more weight and substance for that role. But hey – she's very young, and has lots of time to mature. So a true superstar is born, if not yet at her optimal peak.

The opera includes not one, but TWO mad scenes, with the second, major one staged with some very dramatic effects. She jumps up on a bench, then falls over backwards to be caught in mid-air by women of the chorus. Then she runs to the edge of the stage, falls to the floor, rolls over on her back, hangs her head backwards into the orchestra pit, and proceeds to sing! Where is the society for prevention of cruelty to vocal chords?

The tenor lead was sung by Illinois native Gregory Kunde, whom we remember from Chicago's Lyric Opera when he finished that company's training program over 25 years ago. Since then, he has developed wonderfully – perhaps not to the superstar status of being a replacement for one of the "Three Tenors", but he held his own very well opposite Netrebko's virtuosity.

The staging was nothing spectacular, being a restaging of a decades-old production that is rather static. The whole point of this production was to showcase Netrebko, and that it did spectacularly.

JENUFA

The following night we saw Janacek's *Jenufa*, sung in Czech, so we could recognize some words. Great music, if a rather convoluted story. The libretto omits a lot of the backstory from the play on which it is based, but thankfully the program notes filled us in. Without that, the story would have been incomprehensible – but then incomprehensible stories are nothing new in opera.

The title lead was Finnish soprano Karita Mattila, who was terrific. Her voice is a perfect complement to Netrebko's – rich and full in the middle and lower registers, if not quite as smooth at the top, and she sometimes overused vibrato. The tenor and baritone roles were also sung very well.

The production was not very attractive, with the exception of a representation of a snowfall which was a magical effect (achieved through projection, unlike a Lyric production of *La Cenerentola* in Chicago which used real water to show a rainstorm). The basic elements of the set consisted of two wooden walls which, in various acts, would represent either the exterior walls of a mill or the interior walls of a village house. However, in the latter, the partition between two rooms was not a wall or a drapery, but a huge boulder, about 10 ft. tall and 20 wide (judging by its scale relative to the singers). Huh?

The one partial disappointment was the singing of German soprano Anja Sijla, in the role of Kostelnicka (kos'cielna, the church sexton), Jenufa's stepmother and the mover of the drama. In the first act, she was very weak, almost inaudible (from row K of the orchestra!), but later she came into her own and rescued the part.

Jenufa will be staged by the Washington's National Opera in May, with Patricia Racette and Catherine Malfitano. We haven't heard Racette, but we like Malfitano, especially if she plays the older-woman role of Kostelnicka (in her younger years, we heard her in Traviata and Butterfly). But in any case, see it for the wonderful music - very melodic, reminiscent of late Verdi with touches of Wagnerian brass accents.