

METROPOLITAN OPERA December 2007

We saw three operas in three days. That's pretty intense, and some impressions tend to get jumbled in the retrospect of a few days. Perhaps I should have been making notes after each, but hey, this was a vacation, not a musicology exercise. Here are my impressions of two of them.

Gounod: Romeo et Juliette.

Principals: Anna Netrebko, Roberto Alagna, cond. Placido Domingo

This truly spectacular work from the composer of "Faust" is, sadly, performed much too rarely. We first saw it over 25 years ago at Chicago's Lyric, with then-superstars Mirella Freni and Alfredo Kraus. That was before the days of supertitles, but I retained enough of my French to understand most of the romantic lyricism, and it made a great impression on me.

Where to begin – there is so much to say about this production. Superstar Anna Netrebko as Juliette was truly spectacular. We first heard her last February in Bellini's *I Puritani*, and were truly impressed, but thought her voice a little light and in need of development. No such quibbles this time. Surely there could not have been much development in the intervening 10 months, so I assume it was due differences in the textures of Gounod's and Bellini's music. The other singers were very good, if not spectacular. Roberto Alagna did a very creditable job as Romeo, with perhaps too much vibrato here and there (my eternal quibble). This production run will feature FOUR Romeo's! On a Met Opera broadcast several days later, I heard Netrebko say that it is somewhat difficult to relate to so many partners during the course of a production.

The music is lushly romantic. The opening scene at the masked ball, where R&J meet, is scored in triple time, with many of the rhythms more reminiscent of mazurkas than waltzes. In Juliet's first aria, in which she objects to marriage because she first wants to live (what does that say about Gounod's marital relations?), the rhythm varies between that of waltz and mazurka. Placido was quite competent in the pit.

The libretto is very true to Shakespeare's text, even to the point that the English titles translating the French text quote the original phrases: "He jests at wounds...", "...wherefore art thou Romeo", "Parting is such sweet sorrow...", "A plague on both your houses..." And speaking of titles, the technology installed by the Met several years ago (titles not over the stage but in front of each seat) finally bore fruit – each viewer could choose titles in English, German or Spanish.

The production, in this day of multi-media, was rather static. Large constructions of Renaissance architecture served as backgrounds for most of the scenes. The climactic fight scene, which cuts across the idyllic R&J romance with the realities of the Montague-Capulet feud and sets the whole tragedy in motion – Tybalt's killing of Romeo's friend Mercutio, Romeo's revenge killing of Tybalt and resulting banishment – was choreographed with exquisite skill. But one very major quibble – the antagonists were fighting with knives, as if drunkards in a tavern, and not with swords that

behooves the noblemen they were meant to be (Shakespeare's stage directions merely say: "They fight. Tybalt falls".) In all other R&J productions I have seen, in all media (stage, opera, film, ballet), the duels were with swords. Major disappointment.

The crownpiece of this work is the bedroom scene. It was staged with the white-draped bed suspended in mid-air above a platform that in previous scenes had served as a prop for various purposes – the whole looked like they were lying atop the canopy of a canopy bed. Somewhat silly, I thought. But the singing was exquisite, rendering in music and French a very romantic English dialog. At the end, the bed is dropped down on wires to the platform, and the principals manage to dismount with dignity (the Met seems to be wire-happy this season – see further production descriptions below).

At the end of opera, there are two major departures from Shakespeare. In the original, Romeo walks into the tomb, sees the apparently dead Juliet, takes poison, makes a deathbed soliloquy and dies. Juliet awakes, sees the truly dead Romeo, makes a deathbed soliloquy and stabs herself. Here, she awakes before he dies, but after the poison, so we have a deathbed duet. And the opera ends with this scene of two dead bodies onstage – no entry of the feuding families, no reconciliation, so their deaths are rendered even more pointless.

Prokofiev: War and Peace

Principals: Marina Poplavskaya, Alexej Markov, plus 65(!) solo singers named in the program; cond. Valery Gergiev.

I had very mixed reactions to this work. Certainly one cannot expect a 1000-page novel to be fairly represented in a stage production, but I personally felt that this fell well short of Tolstoy's intent, and presented a hodge-podge of operatic styles. It is presented in 13 scenes divided into two parts, Peace and War. The first relates the romantic awakening of Natasha, the daughter of a count, and follows some of the well-worn conventions of operatic romance stories: boy meets girl, who is an airhead, boy loses girl, boy (or girl, or both) dies. Think Traviata, Rondine, Onegin and many others. Now in this particular story, the final scene is separated from the forgoing by the inconvenience of Napoleon's invasion of Russia, depicted in the "War" part.

This part too follows some shop-worn conventions, this time of Russian opera: poor innocent, want-to-be-left-alone Mother Russia is set upon by rapacious invaders from the West, and the country is saved only through the good graces of Hospodi, the Tsar or his designated agent, and the fortitude of the Russian people. Just another version of the story line in Borodin's Prince Igor, or Mussorgsky's Boris Godunov and Khovantschina. But what made this story especially galling to us was the fact that the lamentation over the invasion of an innocent Russia was written to the dictates of Stalin. So I was expecting that Hospodi would be eliminated from the rescuing team, but no, He was mentioned a couple of times.

Musically, the first part was more "modern" and somewhat dissonant, but not extremely so – reminiscent of the musical idiom, if not quite the same style, as Peter and the

Wolf. The War part was much more traditional, melodic and tonal – I guess Prokofiev, remembering Stalin's wrath at Shostakovich over the dissonance of his *Lady MacBeth of Mstensk*, did not want to risk it by setting a patriotic theme in a modern style. The singing was uniformly good – Poplavskaya was just great. Her voice is heavier and fuller than Netrebko's, being more in the dramatic than lyric mode. Wonder of wonders, she used no vibrato at all! Hearing her was a real pleasure. The number of solo singers was somewhat of a drawback – you never heard enough of one voice to form a clear impression. One of the many roles was sung by Samuel Ramey, who portrayed Marshal Kutuzov, the commander of the Russian army and Tsar's surrogate in the salvation of Mother Russia. Although listed in the cast (as were all 60+ soloists), his biogram was not printed in the program! His part was large enough to enable one to form a clear opinion. He performed wonderfully, singing in a strong voice but in a part without vocal pyrotechnics, as was appropriate for an aged, lame, half-blind character who has been called out of retirement.

The production was a very mixed bag. The stage floor was covered by a shallow dome, parts of which rotated and tilted to produce interesting effects. In the Peace part, the floor was covered with intricately inlaid parquet, representing the floor of a salon or ballroom. In one ballroom scene, a couple of characters were downstage, conversing on the stationary part of the floor, while upstage a crowd was dancing on a rotating part, producing a double-action kaleidoscope of motion. Very effective!

Scene changes were produced by dropping architectural elements (balconies, interior or exterior walls with doors and windows) and furniture (bookcases, armoires) from the flies on wires. Problem was, these elements were not supported in the fore-and-aft direction, and for example, people walking through doors or appearing on balconies caused the structures to sway slightly. That gave the impression of a chintzy production that couldn't afford proper stable sets.

In the War part, the dome surface was changed to simulate bare earth. Here the production was much more spectacular and could in no way be considered chintzy. But the effects were all done with crowds, not sets. There were parades of troops in multi-colored uniforms, amid throngs of peasantry. Too much peasantry, I thought. In all scenes, the vast majority of the crowd was made up of peasants in dull brown rags. Perhaps Prokofiev was told to emphasize the role of the common Russian people, the equivalent in pre-industrial Russia of Napoleonic times of the proletariat, but did the Met have to follow? Or was it because peasant's rags are cheaper to produce than elaborate colorful military uniforms?

Battle scenes were spectacular, with movements of people pushing cannons, carrying wounded, sounds of cannon fire, eruptions of earth from cannon shells (done very effectively with projection).

Overall, the opera is too long by half. Themes and topics are endlessly rehashed. Yes, this is based on a very long novel, but long novels do not necessarily make good long operas – they operate on different levels.

My bottom-line impression: Not a great masterpiece, and would not have entered the standard repertory if it weren't for the Tolstoy connection. Sadly, it does not do justice to that connection, being more along the lines of previous Russian nationalistic propaganda like *Godunov* or *Khovantschina*. Like those, it can maintain a life through spectacular production values (which were only half-realized in this production) rather than innate artistic values.