

Metropolitan Opera 2020

January:	Verdi:	<u>La Traviata</u>
February:	Handel:	<u>Agrippina</u>
	Mozart:	<u>Marriage of Figaro</u>
		<u>Così fan Tutte</u>

La Traviata



Dmytro Popov and Aleksandra Kurzak

Traviata occupies a unique position in the classic operatic canon. Written in Italian to a French story, with arias in rhythms of a Viennese waltz (*Libiamo*) and a Polish mazurka (*Sempre Libera*). And the title role of Violetta requires a soprano that can combine coloratura ornamentation with dramatic spinto singing.

Polish soprano Aleksandra Kurzak was fully up to the challenge and truly spectacular in this Metropolitan staging. She hit amazing high notes with precise intonation and held them flawlessly with no shrillness and no vibrato. Her delivery of the coloratura vocal fireworks in the blockbuster aria *Sempre Libera* was spot-on perfect. But she could sing with delicacy as well as power – her closing aria, *Addio al passato* was sung with heart-rending pathos, sotto voce that still filled the vast

auditorium. It got the greatest ovation of the night. What a great addition to the growing firmament of Polish opera superstars on the international circuit!

Her lover Alfredo Germont was sung by Ukrainian tenor Dmytro Popov, who turned in a mixed performance. He was weak in the early parts – his *Libiamo* was good, but Kurzak's reprise of it was spectacular – she totally overpowered him. Similarly *Un di felice*, which precedes Violetta's showpiece *Sempre libera*, was less than exciting, as was his second-act aria *De miei bollenti spiriti*. However, he improved as the drama progressed, and gave a better performance especially in duets with his father and with the soprano. This being the first performance this season, perhaps he was trying to find his way in this production.

And speaking of Germont père, that was sung by American baritone Quinn Kelsey, whom I have heard and liked in the past, most notably as Amonasro to Netrebko's Aida. His signature aria, *Di Provenza*, was sung beautifully, but maybe needed just a bit more emotional intensity to better express a father's heartfelt appeal to his son. Other than that, he sang wonderfully, with a rich resonant voice.

The secondary roles – Flora, the servant Annina, Marquis, Baron – were performed very well, as should be expected from the Met. The Toreador's dance at Flora's party was magnificently staged by the corps de ballet, with some really acrobatic moves involving lifts and throws (choreographed by Lorin Latarro).

The production featured a unit set (the same for all the acts) which was variously lighted to represent Violetta's and Flora's lavish apartments, the lovers' rural hideaway, and Violetta's final bedroom scene. As in the movie starring Teresa Stratas and Plácido Domingo, the first scene (during the overture) depicts Violetta at the end of her life, with the subsequent action being played in flashback.

The conductor, Karel Mark Chichon, performed with overly dramatic flourishes of the arms, but Piotr Gajewski (conductor of the National Philharmonic near Washington), who was also at this performance, noticed that sometimes he seemed out of sync with the singers.

In sum, a most satisfying performance – the best of the several I've seen of this work on stage.

Agrippina



The Met does not do Baroque opera very often. The vast space and huge orchestra are not an ideal match for this more intimate genre. Still, this performance was a great success. It was a showcase for women: mezzo-soprano Joyce DiDonato in the title role (wife of the emperor Claudius), Brenda Rae as Poppea, and mezzo Kate Lindsey in the pant role of Nerrone (Nero), Agri-

ppina's son from a previous marriage and future emperor. This was the first time I heard DiDonato, and found she fully lives up to her superstar hype. A wonderfully smooth voice, with dead-on intonation and expressiveness at all volumes and pitches.

Brenda Rae is one of my favorite singers, whom I heard and loved in many roles at the Santa Fe Opera (her [*Lucia di Lamermoor*](#) there was a revelation!). She was making her long-awaited Met debut, and held her own beautifully opposite DiDonato. Whereas her full-volume arias were sung with great power and expression, in the quieter dialogue singing she did not project as clearly as I recall of her past performances. Yes, the Met is a vast auditorium, but Santa Fe is vaster – it has no side walls, so her sound had to project to a mountain valley.

Kate Lindsey was outstanding as Nerrone, playing him as a sleazy, drug-addled adolescent with the hots for Poppea (in history, Nero marries her after ascending to the throne). Initially, he seems to exhibit an Oedipal relation with his mother, but that later fades (in history, he murders her).

All three women sing many coloratura passages. One does not associate coloratura singing with mezzo-sopranos, but here both of them performed some glorious fioriture that gave up nothing to the soprano. Rae, of course, specializes in that genre, and performed brilliantly, effortlessly traversing the rapid vocal figurations. Particularly impressive was her ability to unerringly hit and hold a note a wide interval higher, without a tentative "close enough" with subsequent correction, as I've heard from other singers. The two mezzo roles are written at the high end of the range, often crossing over into soprano tessitura. No glorious chest tones as from Amneris or Dalilah.

This production was far from the stereotype of static Baroque stagings which are often more akin to oratorio. The women exhibited exceptional acting skills, with some intense physical moves – especially Lindsey as Nerrone. She sang one aria on her back, slithering around to illustrate the character's snake-like personality. At one point, lying flat, she lifted her legs vertically, then pivoted to a sitting position maintaining the right angle of her body, all without touching the floor with her hands! Rae has demonstrated her acting abilities of physical comedy in the many roles in which I've seen her, and did so here, especially in the scene where she resists the advances of the emperor Claudio – a scene seemingly torn from the headlines of the "#MeToo" era – more on this later.

The men were very good, if less spectacular. The most impressive was bass Matthew Rose as the emperor Claudio, playing the role as a clueless golf-paying buffoon (the setting is in contemporary times) being manipulated by the women (not unlike Derek Jacoby's portrayal in the BBC series "I Claudius"). The military commander Ottone, Poppea's lover, was sung in glorious voice by countertenor Iestyn Davies. Strangely, there is no tenor role – three minor male roles are sung by another countertenor, baritone and bass.

The story revolves around the rivalry of the two women and their ambitions to put their favorites on the throne as successor to Claudio – Agrippina: her son Nerrone, Poppea: her lover Ottone. Along the way, they use their wiles to involve various men in their schemes. These women are in full control, not helpless victims.



Brenda Rae (left) as Poppea, Joyce DiDonato as Agrippina

One delicious scene has both of them appearing in identical gowns. This devolves into two on-stage costume changes, where Poppea sheds her golden gown down to a black one-piece undergarment and dons a less stylish skirt and sweater, then changes again for her scene with Claudio.

The production, by Scottish director David McVicar, first debuted 20 years ago, in then-contemporary times. It is here revived in super-contemporary

times: there is a TV news crew with cordless mikes and shoulder-mounted TV camera, characters talk on smartphones and take selfies. This works quite well, because the underlying themes – political plotting, sexual manipulation and harassment – are universal and pertinent across all ages. As mentioned, Claudio's attempted seduction of Poppea and her resistance is played straight out of #MeToo (even though history records that they were consensual lovers). One super-immediate reference is a scene of a woman tearing up papers from a man she doesn't fancy (see Speaker Pelosi at 2020's State of the Union).

The sets were rather spare, consisting of massive rectangular columns that were moved around to create various smaller spaces on the huge stage. A centerpiece of most scenes was a moveable golden staircase surmounted by a throne, representing the goal to which the two women plot to have their men ascend (see lead photo).

English conductor Harry Bicket led a crisp performance by the orchestra, modulating between forte tuttis and delicate accompaniment, always synchronizing with the entry of the singers to never drown them out.

Marriage of Figaro



Amanda Woodbury as Countess Almaviva, Hanna-Elizabeth Müller as Suzanna, Adam Plachetka as Figaro

This is a story in the grand tradition of drawing-room farce, as penned in the 18th C. by Beaumarchais and Molière, in the 19th by Oscar Wilde and Aleksander Fredro, in the 20th by Jean Anouilh and Sławomir Mrożek. It includes the finding of a long-lost parent (as in Wilde's *Importance of Being Earnest*) and lots of mixups involving people hiding in closets. But the distinguishing characteristic of this telling is that it is set to glorious music.

The main attraction of this production was supposed to be Polish baritone Mariusz Kwiecień as Count Almaviva, but he cancelled due to illness as was replaced by Canadian Etienne Dupuis, who performed brilliantly. Adam Plachetka in the title role and Hanna-Elizabeth Müller as Suzanna were a little subdued in their opening duet, not projecting enough emotion nor vocal power, but warmed up in later scenes and on balance turned in wonderful performances. Soprano Amanda Woodbury as the Countess, mezzos Marianne Crebassa as Cherubino and Mary Ann McCormick as Marcellina were excellent both vocally and dramatically. The minor roles were also done very well – bass Mauricio Muraro as Dr. Bartolo, tenors Keith Jameson as Don Basilio and Tony Stevenson as Curzio (note – no tenor in a major role!), bass Paul Corona as Antonio the gardener and soprano Maureen McKay as his daughter Barbarina, Cherubino's love interest.

The conductor, Cornelius Meister from Germany, managed the transitions from vocal to orchestral quite adeptly, never drowning out the singers, but some of the orchestral fortes seemed unbalanced: the brass overpowered the strings and winds which form the soul of Mozart's music.

The staging was moved to 1930's Spain, but otherwise remained true to the original. And the disguising of Cherubino as a flapper was more believable than in 18th C. hoop skirts, although believability is not a requirement in this genre. The stage design, by Richard Eyre, consisted of a unit set of four metallic towers, which rotated to reveal various spaces: Figaro's room, the Countess' bedroom, great dining hall of the mansion, and the garden. It was visually and dramatically quite effective.

Così Fan Tutte



The last time I saw this was several decades ago, and what I most remember is the silliness of the story. What remains with me from this subsequent hearing is the emotional depth and sophistication of the music. It's truly amazing how such an inconsequential plot line can be dressed in music of such

dramatic substance.

The production is set in a seaside amusement park ala Coney Island of the 1950's, and includes a troupe of real sideshow performers: sword swallowers, fire-eaters, a bearded lady, snake dancer. It is a repeat of the staging the Met did two years ago and works quite well, as the story is equally incongruous in any era. However, some of the scenes are jarring to contemporary sensibilities – there is the misogyny of the title ("All Women Do Thus," i.e. are unfaithful) and the disguised lovers' relentless pursuit of the two sisters, including barging uninvited into their hotel rooms, comes uncomfortably close to stalking. Disguises are more believably unrecognizable with lots of facial hair, which was absent here (in the original, Ferrando and Guglielmo are disguised as bearded Bulgarian noblemen). But then opera was never meant to be politically correct nor realistically believable.

The singing was phenomenal. The initial duet by Fiordiligi and Dorabella (soprano Nicole Car and mezzo Serena Malfi) was done exquisitely, followed by a number that alternated duets by the women and their lovers in various combinations, which then turned into a glorious quartet. Whereas the initial duet had the two women next to each other on a boardwalk, the subsequent duets and quartet were performed by singers on opposite sides of the stage, which is more difficult to pull off. Credit goes to conductor Harry Bicket (same one as in *Agrippina*) for keeping everything together. He also managed the transitions between accompaniments and tutti without stepping on the vocalists, and elicited a delicate, very Mozartean sound from the large orchestra.

Tenor Ben Bliss as Ferrando and baritone Luca Pissaroni as Guglielmo were excellent, in duets, ensembles and solo arias. Among the other roles, the outstanding one was soprano Heidi Stober as Despina, here portrayed as a hotel maid, and in her disguises as Dr. Magnetico and the notary, portrayed as a Texan girl in a ten-gallon Stetson. Bass Gerald Finley as Don Basilio moved the story along with great singing.



Particularly spectacular parts of the staging included a background with a Ferris wheel and roller coaster with sideshow posters in the foreground (see top photo), but most effectively, the depiction of the Starlight Motel, showing the exterior façade of three units under a blue neon sign. Each unit could be individually rotated to reveal the room inside. In some scenes, the unit would be turned perpendicular to the stage, so that action both within the room and outside it could be portrayed simultaneously (at left). Dora-

bella's long second-act aria was sung from the gondola of a hot-air balloon suspended from the flies, floating back and forth high above the stage. Great stage mechanics!