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Opera

'The Bartered Bride' in Munich
International Opera Awards—the shortlists
Iain Bell: composing for Whitechapel's women
Jamie Barton—storyteller extraordinaire
Verdi, Spain and 'La forza del destino'



Argentina

Buenos Aires

Should the review of a performance consider only what is actually heard and seen on stage? Or is it fair also to give thought to the efforts preceding and involving a production? I couldn't help taking into account the surrounding circumstances when attending a performance (on November 8) of Ambroise Thomas's *Hamlet* produced by JUVENTUS LYRICA, an independent, non-profit organization that has been dedicated to promoting young lyric artists since 1999. Relying only on private support, its achievements are far more than tentative or experimental: it claims to have staged 96 operas seen by more than 400,000 people during that period. This year it has presented *Die Fledermaus*, *Il barbiere di Siviglia*, *Gianni Schicchi* and *Pagliacci*. In a country with long-lasting, deep economic difficulties, this achievement is more than remarkable.

Hamlet, a co-production with the Dutch company Opera2Day, had four performances at TEATRO AVENIDA, a venue opened in 1908, originally intended for Spanish theatre and zarzuela companies. Seating 1,200, the theatre is visibly in need of restoration work but still looks impressive. The pit is too small for a *grand opéra* orchestra so the conductor Hernán Schvartzman had to make do with a reduced ensemble but he succeeded in delivering a dramatically dynamic and musically sensitive rendering of a not easy score.

The singers, mostly in their 20s and 30s, betrayed no hint of amateurism and performed with admirable commitment, entirely in the service of the music and drama. The baritone Armando Noguera (*Hamlet*) and the soprano Laura Pisani (*Ophélie*) rightly stood out, as the composer gives pivotal importance to their roles, and had ample opportunity to display the quality of their voices as well as their convincing theatrical abilities. *Ophélie*'s Mad Scene was an expected high point and Noguera met one vocal challenge after another. Felipe Cudina Begovic (*Claudius*), Sabrina Cirera (*Gertrude*) and Santiago Bürgi (*Laërte*) also gave fine performances.

The director María Jaunarena had revised the libretto substantially, introducing a few reasonable cuts but respecting the Carré and Barbier dramaturgy. What did not work was her inclusion of a number of

OPERA AROUND THE WORLD

- 293 **Argentina** Buenos Aires
- 294 **Austria** Graz
- 295 **Belarus** Minsk
- 297 **Belgium** Ghent and Antwerp
- 298 **Canada** Montreal
- 299 **Chile** Santiago
- 300 **China** Macau
- 301 **Croatia** Zagreb
- 303 **Czech Republic** Brno
- 305 **Finland** Helsinki
- 306 **France** Nice, Toulouse
- 309 **Germany** Bonn, Leipzig, Munich, Saarbrücken
- 314 **Ireland** Dublin
- 315 **Italy** Bologna, Florence, Palermo, Trieste, Vicenza
- 320 **Netherlands** Amsterdam
- 322 **Norway** Trondheim
- 323 **Russia** St Petersburg
- 323 **Spain** Vigo
- 324 **Switzerland** Basel
- 325 **United States** Juneau, New Orleans, New York, San Diego, San Francisco, Seattle, Washington

lines from Shakespeare, recited in French by the singers. This had the effect of breaking the stylistic unity, switching between spoken theatre and through-composed opera. Her direction of the singers was, however, outstanding.

Thomas's *Hamlet* may not be at the summit of 19th-century operatic compositions, but when listening nowadays to a good performance on stage, one can understand why it enjoyed such a success until World War I, why it fell out of favour afterwards, why baritones rejoice in exhuming it from time to time, and why unprejudiced audiences can nowadays respond with delirious applause at the end, as happened here.

FRANCISCO JOSÉ FOLCH

Austria