

Notes from Behind a Biedermeier Column

*The new Zurich 'Holländer' is assessed on the concert platform in London
by Tash Siddiqui and on stage in Zurich by Laura Möckli*

Der fliegende Holländer. Bryn Terfel (Dutchman), Anja Kampe (Senta), Matti Salminen (Daland), Martin Homrich (Erik, London), Marco Jentzsch (Erik, Zurich), Liliana Nikiteanu (Mary), Fabio Trümpy (Steersman); augmented Zurich Opera Chorus and Philharmonia Zurich/Alain Altinoglu; Andreas Homoki (director), Wolfgang Gussmann (set and costume designer), Susana Mendoza (costumes), Franck Evin (lighting). Royal Festival Hall, London, 15 December 2012; Zurich Opera House, 11 January 2013

London

Andreas Homoki's new production of *Der fliegende Holländer* had barely hit the boards of the Zurich stage at its premiere on 9 December 2012 before the storm-tossed cast, chorus and orchestra – complete with wind machine – were shipped wholesale to London for the concert performance on 15 December. As a vehicle to show off Bryn

Daland's Norwegian crew as 19th-century businessmen (Photo: Toni Suter/Tanja Dorendorf)



Terfel in the title role and Anja Kampe as Senta – the same pairing as in Tim Albery's 2009 *Holländer* at the Royal Opera House¹ – the performance succeeded brilliantly, and it is easy to see why the Southbank Centre would welcome this pre-packaged shipment. In other ways, though, the concert seemed ill-planned and under-rehearsed, and Marco Jentzsch's Erik was sadly indisposed.

Terfel's portrayal of the tortured Dutchman was as good as, if not better than his *Holländer* at Covent Garden in 2009. Never afraid to surrender beauty of tone in favour of expressive force and clear diction, he whispered, growled and powered his way through his opening Monologue, finally spitting out the consonants of 'in Nichts vergehn'. Terfel, too, is that rare creature who can sing a true *pianissimo*. Kampe threw herself into Senta's fearsome Ballad with her usual fearless abandon: the results were, again, not always beautiful, but dramatically thrilling.

The Zurich team based their production on the original 1841 score, thus leaving out the ten-bar 'redemption' endings added to the Overture and opera in 1860. But Kampe sang the Ballad in G minor rather than the original A minor, and the action was set in Norway, as is usual, and not in Scotland, as Wagner's 1841 score dictates. Some of Wagner's subsequent changes in orchestration were also incorporated, notably the alteration he made for Liszt's 1853 Weimar production. At the moment in Act II when the Dutchman enters the spinning room and Senta cries out, he replaced the original brass and timpani with a string pizzicato and woodwind chord.²

In a letter to Liszt, Wagner explained his rationale: 'The effect of the brass and timpani at this point was too coarse, too material; I want the hearers to be startled by Senta's cry when she sees the *Holländer*, not by the brass and timpani.' At the Royal Festival Hall, though, when Senta cried out at the Dutchman's 'entrance', he hadn't actually entered yet. The singers entered and exited the stage as their singing parts demanded, so the Dutchman and Daland came in afterwards. And this was just one case where the concert performance should have been thought through a little better. The Zurich production is played without an interval, as originally conceived by Wagner, whereas in London there was an interval after Act I; but instead of inserting the full-scale close written by Wagner in 1842, the music simply stopped abruptly, and then carried on after the interval with the transition between Acts I and II. At one point Fabio Trümpy's Steersman slid precariously along the polished floor of the platform, and Matti Salminen's Daland tripped over the edge of the conductor's podium and nearly fell – perhaps further indications of a lack of rehearsal.

Martin Homrich, Marco Jentzsch's last-minute replacement, did a sterling job as an ardent Erik. Matti Salminen as Daland had an old-fashioned, barking, buffo-like tone, but whether that was part of his portrayal of Daland or an indication that his voice is finally running out of fizz I could not determine. Liliana Nikiteanu as Mary was an unusually sexy spinning mistress. Apart from some minor brass and woodwind slips in the Overture and a brief ensemble problem in the *Südwind* chorus, the orchestra and chorus performed commendably. Alain Altinoglu's conducting was well-paced and excellently balanced, if a little low-key.

¹ Reviewed in 'A *Holländer* for the Credit Crunch', *The Wagner Journal*, iii/2 (2009), 70–74.

² I am grateful to Julika Weinecker, press officer at the Zurich Opera, for confirming these details.

Precisely because a concert performance is presented without all the normal theatrical trappings, the pure focus on the performers and their character portrayals can sometimes create its own brand of operatic magic. We need think no further than *Gramophone's* choice *Holländer* recording: Otto Klemperer's live performance at the Royal Festival Hall on 19 March 1968.³ On the present occasion, however, theatrical *phantasmagoria* got lost in transit from stage to concert platform. For that, we must turn to Laura Möckli in Zurich.

Zurich

As Alain Altinoglu and the Philharmonia Zurich launched into the first notes of Richard Wagner's *Der fliegende Holländer*, the stage curtain remained tantalisingly closed, delaying the crucial moment of visual impact. Judging by the stunned silence and confused applause following the orchestra's opening fireworks, I was not the only one who, left to my own devices, had already plunged into the world of tragic legend conjured up by Wagner's evocative overture. However, when the curtain rises, these figments quickly evaporate: what meets the eye is not the anticipated stormy ocean scene, but rather a gigantic panelled oak construction that fills a large part of the centre-stage. How could one not be a bit disappointed? But also curious upon realising that this dark Biedermeier obstacle constitutes the sole setting around which Andreas Homoki will direct his star-studded cast for the following two hours of riveting drama.

In accord with Wolfgang Gussmann's sobering decor, captain Daland (Matti Salminen) and his crew are not boisterous sailors but immaculately dressed businessmen who prefer to discuss the strategies of their 19th-century nautical import company over the newly invented telephone than to engage in real maritime adventure. Salminen's domineering buffo interpretation of Daland as a despotic, greedy CEO is persuasive and funny, while the male chorus's stylish entrepreneurial outfits match the sharp precision of its ensemble singing. Only the young Steersman or office boy (Fabio Trümpy) longs to leave the oppressive office, but is forced to stay and perform his lone-some sailor's ditty bravely among the crowd of contemptuous capitalists.

Suddenly a dark glowering figure (Bryn Terfel) materialises out of thin air: at last a real seafarer with a rugged coat and red feathers in his hat, whose powerfully disturbing presence sends everyone sprawling to the ground as if an armed gangster had just entered the room. On the horns' emblematic tritone call, the chorus transforms into an uncanny zombie crew, commanded now by a less mundane captain – the accursed Dutchman himself. This smooth transition into surreality, though lacking the direct visual potency of other stagings (perhaps most memorably Harry Kupfer's vulva vessel of the 1978 Bayreuth production) has the significant advantage of discretion, occurring almost imperceptibly as if we ourselves had just dropped off to sleep and were hovering on the brink of a dream.

Two worlds collide; yet instead of waking up with a jolt, we sense fantasy merging into reality: the spectral Dutchman adapts to his new surroundings, removes his pirate hat and shifts gradually from the chilling despair of his initial recitative and aria to the more engaging and persuasive tone of his duet with captain Daland. As expected, Terfel and Salminen masterfully embody the two grotesque titans, filling the opera house with

³ Available on Testament SBT2 1423.

their resounding voices and dramatic intent. In some of the more nuanced moments, one catches a glimpse of a lighter Italianate vocalità undeniably suggested in this duet. However, such subtlety is regrettably not explored fully and the contrasting dramaturgical forces at work in this passage are minimised, so that the tradition of obstinately heavy Wagnerian interpretation remains intact.

One of the main strengths of the Zurich staging concept lies in its ability to suggest that there is (luckily) more at stake than what meets the eye: what goes on when characters disappear behind the dreaded column? Who is the unnamed black servant reluctantly obeying Daland's beck and call? Where is the sea that is unmistakably heard yet reduced to a picture frame on the wall? The performers' beautifully directed stage movements shift back and forth between stylised real-time acting and controlled slow-motion effects; the cast sporadically rushes from one side to the other of the stage, as if thrown by an invisible hand: could it be that all along we have been navigating the ocean's tempestuous waters from inside the mysteriously missing ship?

With a whirl of the column the scene changes, introducing exquisitely detestable female counterparts, a hoard of manically typing secretaries in place of Wagner's industrious spinners. Sadly, although the action on stage is entertaining and well acted, the women's chorus could not quite find its bearings in terms of tempo and cohesion, and Altinoglu struggled audibly to keep things together. Liliana Nikiteanu's interpretation of Mary as a repressed pervert fell just short of being convincing, her few phrases not providing enough scope to convey the necessary depth of character. What a relief when Senta (Anja Kampe) discards her restrictive business clothes, shakes down her strangled hair and climbs onto the nearest desk, wreaking havoc among the meticulously arranged tableau of frustrated femininity. Beware! This Senta is no mad woman, no dim-witted puppet, no hopelessly romantic dreamer or sexually abused victim, as she is often portrayed in contemporary productions: Kampe's sophisticated incarnation of a passionate, rebellious, irrational yet at the same time sensitive and intelligent woman illuminates the stage throughout the evening.

Undeniably, a major problem in Wagner performance today concerns the issue of tempo. While many passages of *Holländer* are actually played much faster than Wagner would have expected, Senta's famous Ballad is consistently slowed down to a sluggish *Largo* (dotted crochet = between 40 and 50) instead of the suggested *Allegro non troppo* (dotted crochet = 63) suitable to such a dramatic narrative. Even the application of technological magic (the sea in the picture frame comes to life at this point, revealing itself to be a flat-screen image rather than a canvas) cannot infuse enough kinesis into the scene to help Kampe sing all of her phrases in one breath.

Perhaps my irritation with the lethargic Ballad explains my instantaneous dislike of the quite unnecessary sea picture/flat-screen effect, compounded when a ridiculously small animated vessel appears on the distant horizon – later, though, this modern prop proves strangely effective: in the central love duet, Terfel and Kampe weave their own experienced symbiotic magic, playing hide and seek around the austere column, drawing slowly closer until they sit side by side on a couch with their backs to the public, like an old couple watching television. The ancient, legendary quality of their powerful love bond, sealed in a single lingering kiss, is paradoxically enhanced by the spectacular banality of its setting.

Ordinarily the character of Erik struggles to develop into anything more than a boring fifth-wheel act. Already in his 'Remarks on the performance of the opera *Der fliegende Holländer*' of 1852, Wagner recognised Erik's tendency towards 'sentimental whining' and insists his 'stormy, impulsive and sombre' nature be kept in mind. From his first entrance, Marco Jentzsch manages to secure an unusual degree of attention through his emphatically poised stage presence, enhanced by a bright green hunting costume that clashes drastically with the overall drabness of the set. This Erik is an outsider with nothing to offer in terms of comfort, security or social conformity but his deep and unremitting love. When Senta kisses him passionately, the fateful love triangle becomes, for once, a truly compelling dilemma which lasts up until the final seconds of the opera, when the desperate, but still rebellious, Senta shoots herself with Erik's rifle, quite a few seconds after she is supposed to have jumped into the churning ocean.

Homoki's most audacious move is an altogether darker political reading of the sailors' celebratory party: instead of a spooky ghost dance on the phantom ship, Daland's black servant (Nelson Egede) transforms into a stylised African warrior who denounces the crimes of colonialism as the real reason behind the Flying Dutchman's damnation, and calls for a revolutionary uprising. This vertiginous zoom out from the level of individual destiny to spheres of global implication seems to have ultimately proved too overwhelming for both Jentzsch and Terfel; both singers began to encounter serious vocal problems in the last third of the performance, suggesting that, despite the overall success of this remarkable production, it is high time to bring out a more subtle approach to Wagnerian tempo and vocality from behind the Biedermeier column.



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