

Santa Fe's seesaw season

Some operas fulfill promise, others fall flat

By Ifan Payne

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Santa Fe, N.M.—Two lessons can be drawn from the 26th season of the Santa Fe Opera, which ends Saturday. The first is that the successful staging of an opera requires of all concerned a commitment to the opera as music and as theater. The other is that lack of confidence in an opera can lead to a waste of talent and resources.

Of the season's five productions, the world premiere of "The Confidence Man," by American composer George Rochberg, aroused the greatest interest beforehand. But it was Richard Strauss' "Liebe der Danae" that turned out to be the runaway hit of the season and proved that even comedy must be taken seriously.

'Der Liebe der Danae'

This bedazzling staging of Strauss' penultimate opera took its cue from the work's subtitle, "A Cheerful Mythology." The stylized sets by Rouben Ter-Arutunian—who also designed the gloriously imaginative costumes—were framed by transparent, translucent and sparkling side panels. Their otherworldly quality was complemented by Craig Miller's lighting, particularly in Danae's dream scene.

What Ashley Putnam, as the mythical heroine, lacked in the way of a soaring voice to encompass Strauss' gorgeously arching musical lines, she more than com-



Victor Braun in 'Die Liebe Der Danae' (David Stein)

pensated for by her animated, convincing acting. Victor Braun successfully portrayed an all-too-human Jupiter, and agile James Hoback was an extraordinary Mercury.

Only the Midas of Dennis Bailey, whose voice was unfocused, fell short of complete success. The cast was rounded out by a wondrously bebosomed quartet of queens. John Crosby, the Santa Fe company's general manager, conducted with passion and lyricism, and the whole production was a triumph for director Colin Graham.

'The Confidence Man'

With his eagerly awaited first opera, Mr. Rochberg and his librettist wife, Gene, have amplified one of the composer's favorite themes—interconnected experiences and the web of human existence—and attempted to show that man lives or dies by trust in his fellow man.

Based on Herman Melville's novel of the same name, "The Confidence Man" is set mainly in the chimerical valley of Crystal City on the banks of the Mississippi. The Rochbergs use the parable of the ruin and death of China Aster, the candle maker, to illustrate various theses within the overall theme.

On stage, the concept of the interwoven threads of life was illustrated by the Confidence Man's snakelike shedding of identities; by the nested boxes of sets that suggested the bric-a-brac of a life neatly ordered but entangled with other lives; and by the onionlike construction of a minstrel play within a morality tale within a drama within an opera.

Mr. Rochberg's music is characterful and attractive, reminiscent of Puccini strained through Schoenberg, full of catchy and memorable melodies. John Schefler's striking but simple sets highlighted the fluid staging by Richard Pearlman.

For the most part, the performances were excellent, with Sunny Joy Langton as Aster's wife, Annabella, and Richard Best and Robert Osborne as Old Plain Talk and Old Prudence, respectively, catching both eye and ear. Neil Rosenshein sang the central part of China Aster well, but his portrayal failed to engage one's sympathies fully.

The opera's weakness lay in the Rochbergs' apparent lack of theatrical sense. There was little of the pacing and variety, of the dramatic climaxes and resolutions that are necessary to grip the attention. In the crucial role of the Confidence Man, Brent Ellis worked hard, but he needed clearer diction and more animation to spark his scenes to life.

'The Marriage of Figaro'

In Rhode Levine's staging, Mozart's opera promised much in the first act. However, even strong performances by Sheri Greenawald as Susanna, Malcolm King as Figaro, Judith Forst as Cherubino and, especially, Michael Devlin as the Count failed to prevent the production from disintegrating into meaningless buffoonery in the last act.

Edo de Waart conducted a lithe and well-paced performance, although, with not a trill in sight, the production paid little attention to stylistic requirements. It also was bothersome that there was only one door in the first scene, set in an attic, although the libretto explicitly calls for a room with two doors between the Count's and the Countess' bedrooms.

'Mignon'

Ambroise Thomas' "Mignon" also suffered here and there from an inability to take things seriously. For some reason, Wilhelm Meister and Mignon were made to sit for long periods in the middle of the street. That Foline was never on a balcony made nonsense of Wilhelm's question, and the wonderful "Adieu, Mignon" went for naught for lack of dramatic context.

Nevertheless, the staging was successful. Frederica von Stade was a touching Mignon and Barry McCauley an animated Wilhelm. The sets were framed attractively in baroque style, but nothing could overcome the lack of verbal pointing caused by the opera being sung in French by English-speaking performers.

'Die Fledermaus'

"Die Fledermaus" was an excellent example of what happens to an opera when the producers have no confidence in it. Tomfoolery and farce were applied heavily to the comedy. However, the production did bring to light an interesting newcomer in Mary Jane Johnson as Rosalinda, who has a lovely soprano and moves well on stage.

The productions announced for the Santa Fe Opera's 1983 season are Offenbach's "Orpheus in the Underworld," Strauss' "Arabella," Donizetti's "Don Pasquale," Britten's "Turn of the Screw" and Cavalli's "Orione."

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