

Showcase 2009

National Opera Studio at the Hackney Empire, June 4

Adept at displaying its graduates' achievements at the end of their one-year course, the NOS always experiments with variations in presentation. This year the 11 singers took part in extracts from six operas, in which they had been coached by their three répétiteur colleagues. They were directed by Jo Davies, with Yannis Thavoris's designs looking anew at periods and backgrounds.

The opening scene from *The Rape of Lucretia*, set in a military club, made a powerful impact. Nicholas Lester as the petulant, conceited and randy Tarquinius, Benedict Nelson as the bitter, drunken Junius, and Wade Kernot as the more measured, darker-voiced Collatinus all judged their performances admirably. Cárthaigh Quill supplied the Male Chorus's commentary. Disconcertingly without a musical break and with only a rearrangement of the drapes, the scene dissolved straight into the last act of *Les Pêcheurs de perles*, with Nelson as Zurga confronting the priestess Leïla. She was sung by Ida Falk Winland with slender but vibrant tone; Nelson supplied muscular singing and meaningful words in the cavatina 'O Nadir' and, though Falk Winland's words could have been clearer, their mutual recriminations concluded the scene dramatically. The linking of this emotional exchange with the prima donnas' squabbling in *Der Schauspieldirektor* was bathetic: better to have isolated Verity Parker's sparkling execution of Frau Herz's coloratura and Valda Wilson's account of Frau Silberklang's rondo, not to mention their spat with Quill's Vogelsang, cut off by his fusing the lights.

After the interval, the encounter between a khaki-clad Pollione and traditionally-robed Adalgiša created a culture clash no less profound than Bellini's original scenario. But though the tenor Jonathan Stoughton and mezzo Alexandra Cassidy convinced us of the tribulations of their secret love, they were not expressed in the flowing bel canto line prescribed. Another couple, not lovers but conspirators, were in polished control of a Rossini vocal line: the mezzo Susan Boyd as a sparky, scooterized Rosina, full of charm and cheek in her scene with the versatile Lester's engaging Figaro.

Opera, August 2009

Mozart's Figaro, roundly sung by Kernot, dominated the final act of his opera as a warm, sympathetic personality but made all the verbal points in 'Aprite un po'. He was partnered by Sarah Power, whose, flowing, unforced singing of Susanna's 'Deh vieni' gave much pleasure. The Royal Ballet Sinfonia, conducted by Mark Shanahan, provided sound orchestral support.

MARGARET DAVIES