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A sparkling *L'elisir d'amore* with Damrau and Breslik in Zurich

★★★★☆ ?

By Jonathan Sutherland, 29 June 2015

There aren't many laughs in Zürich these days. Ongoing scandals in the banking sector, billions of Swiss francs being shuffled to safer shores, rampant anti-Schengen sentiments and the never-ending farce that is called FIFA have all contributed to a general mood of doom and gloom in this pristine metropolis of conspicuous wealth and dubious propriety. For perfect escapism, nothing could be better than two hours at the Opernhaus Zürich to enjoy the recent revival of Donizetti's comic masterpiece *L'elisir d'amore*. It's just what the doctor (Dulcamara) ordered.



Pavol Breslik (Nemorino)

© Monika Rittershaus

Grischa Asagaroff's endearing 2010 production (with just one or two ideas poached from Otto Schenk's classic staging in Vienna) with charming sets and costumes by Tullio Pericoli made for a visually entertaining evening. There was even a mechanized wild boar which zoomed across the stage on three occasions for no particular purpose but sent a titter through the usually titter-averse Swiss audience.

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“The duet with Dulcamara in Act II was a Broadway-esque showstopper”

Reviewed at Opernhaus, Zürich on 26 June 2015

PROGRAMME

Donizetti, *L'elisir d'amore*

PERFORMERS

Zurich Opera

Giacomo Sagripanti, *Conductor*

Grischa Asagaroff, *Director*

Tullio Pericoli, *Costume Designer, Set Designer*

Diana Damrau, *Adina*

Pavol Breslik, *Nemorino*

Massimo Cavalletti, *Belcore*

Lucio Gallo, *Dulcamara*

Hamida Kristoffersen, *Giannetta*

Philharmonia Zürich

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Using huge colourfully painted side and rear flaps, the setting seemed much more like a bucolic picnic spot in a large forest than anything to do with an Italian (or more correctly, Basque) village. But none of this mattered. It was the fine singing and outstanding comic acting which provided just cause for celebration.

Led by the 33 year-old Rossini-specialist Giacomo Sagripanti, the Philharmonia Zürich played all the dotted rhythms and infectious accelerandi of the score with crisp accuracy, despite occasional lapses in intonation in the higher strings. There were also several passages where synchronization between orchestra and chorus was less than metronomic, but this was usually restricted to the more frenetic *Allegro vivace* concertante passages such as "Davver saria da ridere" in Act I. The more lyrical moments (e.g. the solo bassoon in "Una furtiva lagrima" and flute introduction to Adina's "Prendi, prendi" in Act II) were played with sensitive and subtle phrasing.



Massimo Cavalletti (Belcore) and Diana Damrau (Adina)

© Monika Rittershaus

The strongest impression from this performance, however, was the all-round excellence of the entire ensemble. Even the small role of Giannetta was admirably sung by young Norwegian soprano Hamida Kristoffersen, who is a member of the International Opernstudio Zürich. With a rich, agreeable timbre, seamless legato, admirable projection and a very pleasing stage presence, this is a singer to watch.

Emerging from an enormous cartoon-painted travelling credenza, Lucio Gallo's Dulcamara was not just a bombastic buffo character, but also a singer of surprising vocal range and ability. His lower notes and articulation, especially during the Act II duet with Adina, were consistently impressive. Vocal excellence continued with Massimo Cavalletti's Belcore. His interpretation was not only memorable for a credible swaggering stage persona (with lots of crotch re-adjustments) but for outstanding vocal qualities, especially a ringing, effortless top register. The higher tessitura of the role held no horrors at all – the top F naturals on "No, no" in Act I were as clarion-like as Dulcamara's trumpet.

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Ravens of misfortune: Barrie Kosky's innovative *Macbeth*

Sarah Batschelet, 4th April

Barrie Kosky's new *Macbeth* is devoid of riff-raff, shrill costumes and anything trivial. Instead, it's a feast for the imagination, a case for modern opera at its very best.

★★★★★

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Sarah Batschelet, 28th February

King Arthur, an action-packed five-act semi- or "dramatick" opera with music by Henry Purcell and libretto by John Dryden, took on an entirely new face at its recent Zurich premiere.

★★★★☆

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Sarah Batschelet, 21st February

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Sarah Batschelet, 13th December

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★★★★★

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 Philharmonia Zürich

 Zurich Opera

 Giacomo Sagripanti

 L'elisir d'amore

 Gaetano Donizetti



Pavol Breslik (Nemorino) and Diana Damrau (Adina)

© Monika Rittershaus

As the love-sick Nemorino, Slovakian tenor Pavol Breslik displayed a profound affinity for Donizettian phrasing with an ideal *tenore di grazia* cantilena. This was no Mr Bean-ish moronic village idiot interpretation, but a very naïve young man of agreeable appearance who has a severe case of adolescent infatuation which defies all logic or resistance. The *fioratura* passages were sung with commendable accuracy, while the more legato sections, such as the F natural on “O di fame o d'amor” and the F minor passage “Adina, credimi, te ne scongiuro” in Act I) showed profound musicianship and a perfectly controlled bel canto technique.

“Una furtiva lagrima” was delivered with unusual restraint and introspection and was much more effective because of it. Even the long fermata F natural on “non chiedo” at the romanza’s conclusion was true to the gentle sentiments of the aria and not belted out for cheap effect.

Diana Damrau is one of the most acclaimed coloratura sopranos of today, and rightly so. Whilst she regularly tosses off the vocal pyrotechnics of Zerbinetta, Konstanze or die Königin der Nacht with the lightness of a Salzburgerknockerl, Damrau’s is not one of those bird-like voices which only warble above the stave. Her mid-range and lower register are also impressive. Perhaps most memorably, it was an absolute sense of fun which she brought to the role of Adina. The duet with Dulcamara in Act II was a Broadway-esque showstopper. Certainly the *fioratura*, roulades, scale passages, high Cs and everything else in the coloratura bag were flawlessly executed, but it was often the less brilliant passages such as the *Andantino* “Quanto amore” which displayed Madame Damrau’s vast vocal skills to the utmost.

The entire evening was so heady and intoxicating there was definitely no need for Dr Dulcamara’s bogus balsam in the bar afterwards. Bravi tutti.



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