

Lucia di Lammermoor ★★★

Státní Opera Praha, 27 August 2008

Reviewed by **Malcolm Rock**

Designers Jan Dušek and Josef Jelínek give Sir Walter Scott a Czech aesthetic for the Prague Opera production of *Lucia di Lammermoor*.

With director Anton Nekovar, Dušek and Jelínek put a nouveau spin on Scott's 1819 tale of love oppressed by scheming nobility. Their vision is sparse and suitably bitter, but their melding of period materials with sci-fi style motifs is moot.

Serrated mirrors hang above the action – a congregation of brooding clouds preparing to unleash a tempest on the jagged deeds below. Mirrors later appear on ground level, first reflecting images back at their subjects, then revealing the duplicity behind images (they are two-way panels). Besides a short spell of on-stage rain there is little to suggest a brutal Scottish winter.

It is admirable that Dušek and Jelínek have had the courage to rid the stage of kilts and sporrans, but a perpendicular PVC tunic with twinkling crucifix does not sit comfortably alongside an overcoat reminiscent of those worn by 13th-century Mongol generals. A field of seemingly radioactive gravestones adds to their time unspecific science fiction fantasy.

Musically, *Lammermoor* satisfies with a sustained and patient line. Donizetti's opera peaks late and mutes key performances until the end. Unfortunately his compositional elongation is the ruin of this production.

Dagmar Vaňkátová and Igor Borko as the central lovers Lucia and Edgardo are skilled in the bel canto gymnastics required of their closing arias, but are otherwise remote and unromantic. Borko has a crusty quality to his voice, while Vaňkátová seems quite uninterested in the man for whom her character sacrifices all.

Only Miguelangelo Cavalcanti, as Lucia's brother Enrico, demonstrates a consistent vocal appeal and assured presence. His is the dominant performance.

By abandoning Scott's minacious Scotland and misplacing Donizetti's restraint, Dušek, Jelínek and Nekovar provide a *Lammermoor* in which the shattering phrase "sprinkle with bitter tears my remains" is mere lip-service.

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Tosca ★★★

Bregenz Festsspiele, 22 August 2008
Reviewed by **Malcolm Rock**

Disappointment transcended passion, betrayal and revenge in the Bregenz Festsspiele production of *Tosca* on the floating stage on Lake Constance.

When Floria Tosca realised that her fallen lover Mario Cavaradossi was not feigning his death, her disillusionment was comparable to that felt by the audience earlier in the evening when the heavens opened and the rain began to fall.

Soggy spectators cocooned in blankets and scarves were transferred from the outdoor amphitheatre into the undercover Festival Theatre for a parred down performance.

Some had travelled to Austria from as far as Australia and the Americas to experience the world's most famous open-air opera house. Their disappointment was palpable.

To strip a Bregenz opera of its picturesque al fresco setting is to leave its performers exposed and without legerdemain. Fortunately *Tosca*, under the baton of Rossen Gergov and the direction of Philipp Himmelmann, featured a sturdy ensemble and standout principals.

Peter Sidhom as Baron Scarpia was particularly praiseworthy. His haunting wedding delusion – complemented by a ghostly offstage choir and a stage bathed in chilling purple – demonstrated neurosis and malevolence most compelling.

Hector Sandoval as Cavaradossi was happily green and an ideal match for Tatiana Serjan's naïve Tosca whose public and private lives melted into a single destiny of disaster. Both handled Puccini's capacity to skip between sombreness and ironic cheer with facility.

It is iniquitous to criticise Johannes Leiacker's set given that its indoor manifestation was only ever intended as a plan B.

On the lake his centrepiece was a five-storey-tall eyeball that hovered above the action on heavy-duty hydraulics. Its colossal blue iris was capable of turning 90 degrees to allow tiny singers to scurry across its lofty horizontal surface.

Inside the Festival Theatre the notion was reduced to five static photographs of eyes that donned the floor, ceiling and walls. Their manifold ogling was scored with fluorescent lines resembling a geometric grid. To say that the effect was less impressive than that of its outdoor counterpart is axiomatic.

Leiacker's design is a commentary on surveillance states and the calculation of perfection (Scarpia is watching and Tosca watched). Inside or out, the artifice is unpersuasive and does little to supplement an understanding of Puccini's work.

The itinerary of a seasoned opera lover is incomplete without a visit to the Bregenz Festsspiele. Pray it does not end in rain and tears.

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