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Fondazione Teatro La Fenice RICHARD WAGNER, TANNHÄUSER
Direttore Omer Meir Wellber Regia Calixto Bieito
Photo ©Michele Crosera

Tannhäuser in the Dark — Issue 106, 1 February 2017

Giuseppe Pennisi: 'Darkness is the main feature of this *Tannhäuser*. There is little light on the stage also in the other two acts; both in the Landgrave Palace and the fields around it.

'... the musical aspects were very good. Omer Meir Wellber and the orchestra found the right balance between the diatonic part (Dresden) and the chromatic part (Paris) and were able to keep a good balance between stage and pit.

'As with any "Romantic Grand Opera", *Tannhäuser* requires a lot of soloists, a double chorus, a children chorus and (in the Paris version) a ballet. Paul McNamara deserved full marks. Ausrine Stundyte was a more passionate than sensual Venus. Liene Kinča was a religious but sensual Elisabeth. Christoph Pohl was excellent as Wolfram. All the others were quite good, and the Kolbe Children's Choir deserves a special mention.'

Read more ...

Giuseppe was also in Rome for a controversial *Così fan tutte* and two different versions of *Die Fledermaus*, in Bologna for Verdi's *Macbeth*, and in Florence for a revival of Leonardo Vinci's *Didone Abbandonata*:

'On 8 January 2017, in the small (350 seat) and quite pretty Teatro Goldoni in Florence — an early nineteenth century building with orchestra seats and four rows of small boxes — a masterpiece of early eighteenth century was revived, for the first time in modern times: *Didone Abbandonata* by Leonardo Vinci on a libretto by Pietro Metastasio.



Roberta Mameli as Didone and
Carlo Allemano as Aeneas in
Leonardo Vinci's *Didone Abbandonata* in
Florence. Photo © 2017 Pietro Paolini

'The opera had its debut in January 1726 in the newly built Teatro delle Dame in Rome. It had tremendous success and circulated all over Europe for a few decades. It has a major historical importance as one of the few fully developed examples of *opera seria*; in the early eighteenth century, the world of musical theatre was searching for something different from baroque with its vocalizing, improvisation and the inclusion of moments of coming relief in even quite tragic dramas. In addition, theatres had become mostly private, at least in Rome, Venice and other parts of Italy. There was a fierce competition for getting the best composers and singers.

'Budgets did not allow for expensive machinery; rather, there was a need for sets that could be easily moved from theatre to theatre and from town to town. *Opera seria* met these requirements; an austere musical writing, few singers, no ballet and possibly no chorus, and easy to transport stage sets and props. *Didone Abbandonata* established a style and a syntax for *opera seria*: only six singers — three protagonists and three in

less important roles, sharp distinction between recitatives, either "dry", accompanied only by continuo or "accompanied", viz supported by the full orchestra, and arias, a structure in three acts where the principal singers had two arias per act and the others only one, a very terse and dramatic action with often a "happy ending", and also psychological development of the main characters.' **Read more ...**

Maria Nockin: '[Diana] Damrau is a world-class lyric coloratura soprano and her first act aria was a mere sample of the fine singing to come. Damrau's duets with Vittorio Grigolo were magical. These singers portrayed their parts with a smoldering intensity that ignited the stage. At the same time, they sang with great sensitivity and a magnificent vocal blend that obliterated thoughts of sharp daggers and avenging Veronese toughs. Despite being fully clothed in the Balcony Scene duet, "O nuit divine", they sang of their love with white-hot romantic abandon.

'The Met always produces luxury casting for its high definition transmissions. British mezzo-soprano Diana Montague was a most credible Gertrude. Russian bass Mikhail Petrenko was a sonorous Frère Laurent and bass-baritone Laurent Naouri declaimed Capulet's lines in exquisite French. Mezzo-soprano Virginie Verrez, a winner of the 2015 Metropolitan Opera National Council Auditions and a member of the Met's Lindemann Young Artist Development Program, was a sword-brandishing Stéphano, who sang his aria with smooth *legato* tones.



Diana Damrau as Juliet
in Gounod's 'Romeo and Juliet'
at New York Metropolitan Opera.
Photo © 2016 Ken Howard

'Oren Gradus was a strong Duke, Diego Silva an evil Tybalt, David Crawford a righteous Paris, and Elliot Madore an angry Mercutio. The poison of feuding families divided the nature of the city and spread tension. Soon, it erupted into several well-played sword fights realized by fight director B H Barry.' [Read more ...](#)

Maria also reviews the Met's recent HD screening of Verdi's *Nabucco*.

Alice McVeigh: 'It sounds almost negative but *so often* (and yes, I'm recalling that *Götterdämmerung* where poor old Brünnhilde wore a paper bag over her head, in order to convey to us dumbos in the audience that she had been — yes, I kid you not — *deceived*) wonderful singing, acting and playing are wilfully torpedoed by those fatheads allowed to direct, conceive set design, devise the costumes or otherwise mess about with lighting and choreography.

'But *nobody* was messing last Tuesday [24 January 2017]. The direction varied from excellent to unexceptionable, courtesy of the suave Robert Carsen. With the exception of the set for the second act (which was probably sardonically meant to represent the taste of the Viennese *nouveau riche*) set designer Paul Steinberg was also very cool. There was nothing off-putting in Brigitte Reiffenstruel's costume designs while Philippe Girandeaup showed real comic flair in the use to which he put the dreadfully Trump-like Baron Ochs Auf Lerchenau's attendants, particularly in the seduction scene.



A scene from 'Der Rosenkavalier' at Covent Garden. Photo © 2016 Catherine Ashmore

'At first I found Ann Stephany's Octavian a little stronger in the acting than in the vocal department, and, even in the glorious final scene, hers is not a swoon-worthy voice. Instead it is a hugely intelligent, truly excellent instrument: and one capable of an astonishing range of expression. Rachel Willis-Sørensen's (as the Marshallin) was swoon-worthy from the start, and, in the final trio, nobly triumphant, tender, and

unspeakably moving. Goose-bumps, in fact. Her voice has a golden sheen, even in the top register, that worked brilliantly opposed to Stephany's wiry determination and Sophie Bevan's gloriously unforced silvery tones. (Sophie Bevan sang Sophie, Faninal's daughter — the one for whom Octavian deserts the Marshallin; her effortless high notes transported me to a different and better world.)' **Read more ...**

Roderic Dunnett: 'Ideally, to come off, as this certainly did, *Fledermaus* calls for an extraordinarily gifted conductor, a completely up to the mark orchestra and a vividly imaginative cast and director. There's no doubt that Josh Dixon's canny, natty, amusing staging had a great deal going for it, which, put together with an orchestra of copious talent fabulously well-marshalled by Paul McGrath, made for an evening in the theatre of pure joy and delight.



Eisenstein (Ross Kelly) gets his come-uppance from Prince Orlovsky (Ellie Sterland) in Johann Strauss Junior's *Die Fledermaus* at Opera Warwick. Photo © 2017 Peter Marsh

'Where does one begin? Logically enough, with Ross Kelly's Eisenstein, a lively and insuppressible character whose antics — there were plenty of them — began during the splendidly played overture in which he and his friend, the urbane Dr Falke (Cole McLaren-Bailey), cavort around like a couple of buoyant — well — students. This deliciously over the top opening promised many good things to come, and we were not disappointed. Indeed one of the keys to enjoyment of this staging was the way Eisenstein and Falke played off each other.

'Some of it was pure romping. But much of it was a subtler kind of entertainment, nicely devised and well carried off. The vocals were pleasing too — the attractiveness of Falke being more evident early on, and in his Act II waltz aria, and that of Eisenstein flourishing especially in the bewigged capers of the final act.' [Read more ...](#)

Mike Wheeler: 'If any musical organisation qualifies for that over-worked description "national treasure", it is surely the National Youth Orchestra of Great Britain. With absolutely no concessions needing to be made for age or inexperience, the 160 or so players, taking up every available square inch of the Royal Concert Hall platform, delivered a stunning display of collective virtuosity (Nottingham, UK, 5 January 2017).

'We were taken by surprise, though, with an unannounced opener, and an unannounced conductor — cellist Joshua Mock, stepping forward from his orchestra seat. Lauren Marshall is one of six current members of the NYO Composers scheme. Her five-minute *Suspended Between Earth and Air* shows a keen ear for both striking orchestral sonorities and shapely melodic writing, from its rumbly beginning, with pinpoints of colour (a link to the Brett Dean work that followed) to the serene, slow woodwind theme that emerges at the end.



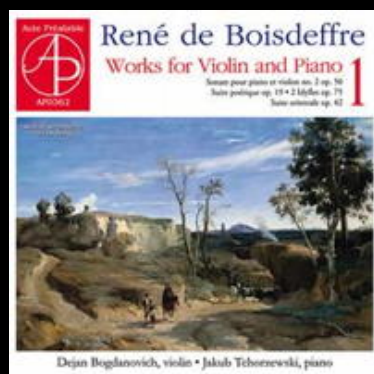
Lauren Marshall talking about her National Youth Orchestra of Great Britain commission *Suspended between earth and air*

'John Wilson took over for the rest of the concert, starting with that Brett Dean piece. *Komarov's Fall*, of 2006, is one of a series of short works commissioned by Simon Rattle and the Berlin Philharmonic Orchestra as "asteroids" to accompany Holst's *The Planets*. Dean based his piece on the tragic story of astronaut Vladimir Komarov, who died when his 1967 space flight ended in disaster. Starting with tiny pin-pricks of violin harmonics, the work moves through chattering wind figures and long-breathed string writing, fluctuating between tenderness and anger, against a vast, mysterious backdrop. The NYO players were on top of the score's every demand, projecting its atmospheric and incisive sound-world with a sure touch.' [Read more ...](#)

Mike also listens to Shostakovich from Nicholas Collon and the BBC Philharmonic Orchestra, and to Schubert and Liszt from Ian Tindale and Nick Pritchard.

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CD SPOTLIGHT — VAGARIES OF LOVE



'To describe Boisdeffre as "worthy but dull" would be doing him a disservice ...'

Paul Sarcich: 'Serbian violinist Dejan Bogdanovich and Polish pianist Jakub Tchorzewski have here resurrected four of the violin works of René de Boisdeffre (no, me neither), a French Romantic composer who seems to have made the bulk of his output between 1878 and 1888, consisting largely of songs and over sixty chamber works. The only contemporaneous critic to have paid him any attention put his songs in the realm of Gounod and Massenet, and the chamber music alongside that of Saint-Saëns and Lalo, citing a Mendelssohnian influence behind it all. There is certainly much to be heard of these composers, as well as others like Franck, in Boisdeffre's work.

'So he does not seem to have garnered much of a following in his own day, despite membership of several august musical bodies, publication, study with some names and some prize-winning along the way. So why the neglect, to the point of being completely unknown today?

'Perhaps some clues lie in the first piece, the thirty minute long *Deuxième sonate*, which with an opus number of 50 might indicate a mature work. It takes a while for both main subjects of the first movement to fall upon the ear, and the predominant lyricism of the violin writing sits over some often pedestrian, if busy, piano work. It is a style that could tempt players into a more Lisztian fury, but this would probably overwhelm it — Bogdanovich and Tchorzewski remain gentlemanly, although more rhythmic incision in the coda would have helped fire it along. Some wayward rhythm in the semiquaver pickups in the second moment also rattle the cohesion somewhat, and some chances for more startling shadings are not taken; but in the third movement Bogdanovich observes the "ed *espressivo*" in the title and plays more with the push and pull of the phrases, varies the tone a lot more and Tchorzewski goes with him.' (*René de Boisdeffre: Works for Violin and Piano 1*, Acte Préalable AP0362)

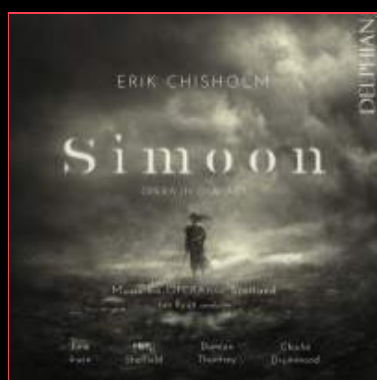
Gerald Fenech: 'As one may surmise from the title, *Mi Palpita il Cor*, all the pieces on this programme deal with the theme of love in all its various aspects — a subject very close to the heart for Baroque composers. The "vagaries of love" offered wonderful opportunities for composers to display the highly expressive gestural language they developed in parallel with contemporary poets and painters to express powerful feelings. Indeed, rhythms, harmonic structures and inventive melodic figures projected moods and their manifestations, such as sighs, laughter and angry outbursts, in great detail, and although no words were sung in sonatas and concertos, this expressive approach was so widespread and so thoroughly comprehended that performers and listeners could find affinity with both genres, and hence similar emotional reactions would be drawn.

'This recording also highlights another aspect of Baroque music: the intermingling of one distinct national style. This was the consequence of the many travels composers and performers undertook all over Europe, making it impossible to decipher a pure expressive national style as the best composers were all-inclusive.

'The five works on this disc span a period of more than a century, and all five composers are famous for their immense contribution to the then expanding world of musical thought and invention. Agostino Steffani (1654-1728) and Giuseppe Sammartini (1695-1750) are Italy's flagbearers, G F Handel (1685-1759) is England's representative, Georg P Telemann (1681-1767) makes his bow for Germany, and, of course, how could France be left in the cold, so in comes Jean-Philippe Rameau (1683-1764).' (*Mi Palpita il Cor: Baroque Passions*, Navona Records, NV6056)



'A beautiful issue that is as heartwarming as it is stimulating.'



'... Chisholm rises to the occasion with some spectacular music ...'

Gerald Fenech: 'Born in Glasgow in 1904, Erik Chisholm remains one of Britain's most enigmatic and underperformed twentieth century composers. Yet in his time his name carried weight, mainly after he set up the Active Society for the Propagation of Contemporary Music, when he was able to bring to Glasgow such eminent composers as Bartók, Hindemith, Szymanowski, Casella, Bax, Walton, Medtner and Schmitt. He was a very fine pianist, and as a conductor he gave the British premieres of such great operas as Mozart's *Idomeneo* and Berlioz's *Les Troyens*, the latter complete with ballets and off-stage bands, a herculean feat for the early 20s and 30s when tastes were more conventional.

'But despite these achievements he was never really accepted in his country of birth, and in 1946 he left for South Africa to try to kickstart his career afresh. Just before he arrived, he spent some time in India and Singapore, where he assimilated Hindustani music, which later was to figure prominently in his works. In South Africa, Chisholm at last found the resources he needed to compose, but the success he deserved never arrived. He died in Cape Town in 1965 aged sixty-one.

'*Simoon* is a short one act opera based on a libretto by August Strindberg and was intended to form part of a triptych called *Murder in Three Keys*. The plot is intriguing and the psychological drama is inspired, brutal and chilling. Evolving in Algeria in the 1880s, it tells the story of the murder of Ali, an Arabian guide, by the French. Biskra has sworn to avenge his death, and when Guimard, a French officer, stumbles into her shelter to avert the Simoon (hot desert wind) she grabs the chance wholeheartedly.' (*Erik Chisholm: Simoon*, Delphian DCD34139)

Gerald also listens to Butterworth, Gurney and Warlock (*Heracleitus*, EM Records EMR CD036), to Xavier de Maistre (*La Harpe Reine*, harmonia mundi HAF 8902276), Prokofiev's Symphonies Nos 4 and 7 from the Bergen Philharmonic Orchestra and Andrew Litton (BIS BIS-2134 SACD), to Karl Jenkins' *Cantata Memoria* (Deutsche Grammophon 00289 479 6486) and to orchestral music by Alexander Glazunov (Praga Digitals PRD/DSD 350 129).

Geoff Pearce: 'These are works to be enjoyed, and it is immediately apparent that they are not given heavy treatment here. The Czech Philharmonic is one of the few European orchestras which has kept its own distinct sound, particularly in the wind, and its wind and brass generally blend very well with the rest of the orchestra. There is balance and lightness here, not achieved by many other orchestras.'

'Jiří Bělohlávek is a master who keeps the ensemble tight but is not out to impress with anything faster and brighter than other conductors. This is evident right from the start of the first dance, marked *Presto*. I have heard conductors take this at an impossibly fast speed or be very bombastic, but Bělohlávek's speeds allow you to believe that this is a dance. He keeps the orchestral forces in check so that the music never sounds too loud or forced, but has the happiness contained within a good glass of *Pils*. In the first dance, there is plenty to enjoy and savour with different moods and textures, a lovely contrasting mellower section and a couple of exciting *accelerandi*.' (*Dvořák Slavonic Dances Opp 46 and 72*, Decca 478 9458)



'There is balance and lightness here, not achieved by many other orchestras.'

Geoff also listens to Sviatoslav Richter playing Musorgsky and Tchaikovsky (Praga Digitals *PRD/DSD 350 076*).



'... round and solidly grounded ...'

Stephen Francis Vasta: 'Early in the digital era and in his career, Mariss Jansons recorded this symphony for Chandos, with the Leningrad Philharmonic (as it still was). The performance was concise, almost terse, with a tensile through-line — probably the most tautly organized since Szell's (Sony). It went immediately to my shortlist, though I never found a comparable enthusiasm for it elsewhere.'

'Now, three decades later, Jansons has returned to the score — *dal vivo* this time, rather than in the studio — with felicitous, though less striking, results. The performance, of course, isn't exactly the same as before, nor could it be. This isn't just because of the passage of time: the two orchestras involved are very different — the Concertgebouw's tone round and solidly grounded where the Soviets favoured brilliance and volatility — and their distinctive sounds and styles inevitably leave their mark on the performances.'

'The first movement is less overtly "fast" now; it flows in a natural, unfussy way, with the shifting harmonies conveying a searching ambivalence. The conductor does move ahead, firmly, for the second group. The peeling midrange brasses at the exposition's climax are weighty, but the *animato* seems to catch some of the players by surprise. In the home stretch, Jansons rather underplays the magical moment where the final *tutti* statement of the big tune yields to the aching cello solo.' (*Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra / Prokofiev: Symphony No 5 / Mariss Jansons, Chief Conductor, RCO Live RCO 16002*)

Ron Bierman: '*Conference of the Birds* is a marvelous introduction to the colors a symphony orchestra can voice, an introduction that could become an occasional alternative to Prokofiev, Britten and Saint-Saëns.

'The story is an unlikely match. Sheffer was already working with bird calls on a piece he was writing for the Cabrillo Festival of Contemporary Music when he accidentally came across the Sufi poem. His objective then became, "... an appreciation of how colorful the sound of a large orchestra can be, and a sense of having been on a spiritual journey with the birds themselves." But Farīd ud-Dīn 'Attār's mystical message is likely to be lost on young audiences outside the Sufi community, especially when only thirty birds of the millions that began the quest for enlightenment survive the necessary journey over seven metaphorical valleys. A gentle, uplifting passage celebrates the discovery that Simorgh lies within them — we are all one and the same.

'Recommended for its colorful, often striking orchestral effects.'



'Sheffer is an experienced conductor, and the Moravian Philharmonic responds well to his direction. Recommended for its colorful, often striking orchestral effects.' (*Jonathan Sheffer: The Conference of the Birds*, Navona Records NV6037)

The late **Howard Smith** had reservations about a CD of Bach Cello Suites played by Angela East of *Red Priest* fame (Red Priest Recordings RP006).

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ASK ALICE — MARCHING IN PROTEST OF DONALD TRUMP



Alice McVeigh

Alice McVeigh: 'I'd originally hoped to make the *main* march, in Washington DC, as I grew up in its suburbs, and still have relatives there. I'd thought it worth the trip, in every respect — and worth getting out of the concert.

However, I was forced to alter my plans, as a very dear friend of mine, Janine Kam-Lal, was dying of cancer and had only six weeks to live, so I wound up going to see her, in Wisconsin, mid-December, and also my parents near DC, and I doubt whether even my dear parents might be willing to put me up twice in *quite* such short order ... though Janine herself would

certainly have been with me, in spirit at least!

So I'm stuck with wishing you ... much love and all the best and to beg you to *march for me*. But don't just march for me.

March for all those women who have no hope, no money and nothing left but hope to march for.

March for those still left in Syria, without adequate food or medicine for their children or themselves.

March for those in Africa, combating mutilation, ignorance and neglect.

March for those in Asia, combating malnutrition and even genocide (in northern Myanmar especially).

March for those in Yemen, whose homes have been destroyed.

March for the ignorant people in Europe: those who voted Brexit, simply because their lives and prospects aren't great, without having a clue why.

March for those who rashly voted Trump, simply because their lives aren't great, without having a clue why — or what the election of a racist, misogynist and fascist toad might conceivably do to improve them.

March for all people, and all women, all those who hope for better, for themselves and for their children.

March for us *all*. [Read more ...](#)

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CLASSICAL MUSIC NEWS

The Brook Street Band launches its inaugural Handel Festival, a two-day event in Norwich, UK, 22-23 April 2017.

We mark the passing of Henry-Louis de La Grange, Veljo Tormis, Anton Nanut, Géori Boué, Vlastimir Trajkovic, Georges Prêtre and Anthony Goldstone. [Read our latest news](#)

NEWSLETTER ARCHIVE

We're building an archive of our monthly classical music newsletters. They've been published in this PDF format since September 2013, and you can download and read any of them from [this page](#).

This newsletter, edited by Keith Bramich, is a monthly taster for Basil Ramsey's high quality and colourful online classical music magazine, published every day since January 1999.

The editorial and advertising copy deadlines for our March 2017 newsletter are both Friday 24 February 2017. [Details here](#).

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