
Tosca at the Royal Opera, Covent Garden and Idomen

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Jonathan Kent's 2006 production of Tosca returns to Covent Garden looking distinctly stronger than it did on its first dreadful revival last summer.

Less wobbling scenery, better stage management and more focused lighting helped, but it was the arresting performances of Jonas Kaufmann as Cavaradossi and Paolo Gavanelli as Scarpia that lifted the bar.

Kaufmann combines a firm, even tenor, rich in the middle and resonant at the top, with great musical intelligence and a dashing Byronic stage presence.

He can do heroic, and he can do romantic: his cry of "Vittoria" in Act 2 sent shivers down my spine, and his phrasing of "E lucevan le stelle" was wonderfully sensitive. He is without doubt the most persuasive Cavaradossi since Domingo's heyday.

Gavanelli makes an insidiously vile Scarpia, quietly sadistic but utterly ruthless in pursuit of his perverted appetite. If only he had been up against a rather more subtle Tosca than Micaela Carosi, an old-school Italian diva with a line in traffic-cop gestures and a sizeable and effective but rough-edged dramatic soprano which paid little heed to the nuances of the text.

Excellent cameos from Hubert Francis (Spoletta) and Kostas Smoriginas (Angelotti) made positive contributions to the proceedings, and Antonio Pappano's conducting had a galvanising influence overall.

A good case for my somewhat heretical view that Idomeneo ranks as Mozart's most beautiful and moving opera was made by a gripping concert performance at the Barbican. Conducted at a cracking pace by Fabio Biondi - who also led his period band Europa Galante - it sustained a level of drama, intensity and energy not normally associated with the ritualised genre of opera seria.

An excellent cast relished every note of this glorious effusion of Mozart's youthful genius. Idomeneo is a role that taxes Ian Bostridge's slimline tenor, but he sang it with mastery, picking his way skilfully round the technical pitfalls and bringing a sad, solemn dignity to his characterisation. Emma Bell seethed fire and brimstone in Elettra's revenge arias, in contrast to the purer passions that animated Kate Royal's lovely Ilia and the clean-toned Idamante of the Lithuanian mezzo Jurgita Adamonyte (substituting for Christine Rice).

In the small role of the minister Arbace, a confident young British tenor currently based in Hamburg suggested that he is ready to give Bostridge a run for his money: Benjamin Hulett, clearly a name to watch out for.

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