

I was delighted when the ensemble decided to restage *The Judgement of Paris* in Wellington (seen on July 30), using a different venue—the HANNAH PLAYHOUSE—and with a different stage director. Apart from one cast change (Mark Bobb as Hermes) the singers were the same as in 2022; here, as before, they conveyed the essence of their characters easily and naturally.

Bobb's almost Puck-like insouciance as the winged (or in his case wheeled; he arrived on a bicycle) messenger seemed effectively to stupefy Paris (the countertenor Toby Gee), adding to his bewilderment at the arrival of the three goddesses. Each of these commanded the stage—Barbara Paterson as a sonorous and stately, attention-compelling Juno; Rowena Simpson a focused and forthright Athena and Anna Sedcole a sweetly-winning Venus.

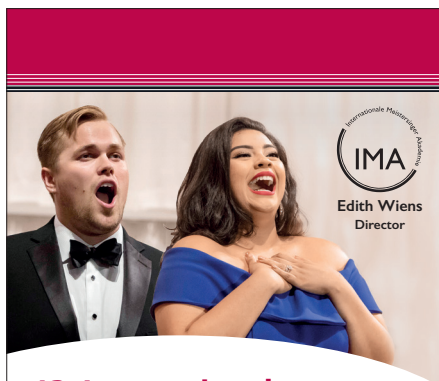
The Queen's Closet played wonderfully, the music's more forthright strains for numbers such as Eccles's 'Let ambition fire thy mind' as stirring as Weldon's chorale-like 'One only joy mankind can know'. These contrasted tellingly with Purcell's 'Gentle Shepherd', sung by Sedcole to the most delicate of guitar accompaniments, and Gee's 'I yield', with the oboe, murmuring guitar, cello and harpsichord setting the seal, as it were, on the scene's desired outcome.

PETER MECHEN

PORTUGAL

Lisbon

On my first visit to Lisbon, I was pleased to get the opportunity to sample OPERAFEST LISBOA, now in its fourth year. This year's festival, running from August 18 to September 9, carried the subtitle 'From heaven to hell': lots of possibilities there. Regretfully, I missed a new production of



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A Flauta Mágica: Mozart's *Singspiel* at Operafest Lisboa

Bizet's *Carmen* and a suitably contrasting double bill of Puccini's *Suor Angelica* and *Rigor Mortis*, a premiere from Francisco Lima da Silva.

However, I did see a new staging of Mozart's *A Flauta Mágica* (*Die Zauberflöte*), sung in Portuguese, subtitled in both Portuguese and English (September 2). The publicity announced an evening lasting 100 minutes, suggesting a drastically cut text. In the event, although there were cuts, mostly to spoken passages (no conference of Sarastro's followers, for example, a welcome loss), the show began at 9pm and didn't finish until 11.40; the many pre-teens in the audience seemed to have stayed awake throughout. The open-air venue was the gardens of the NATIONAL MUSEUM OF ANCIENT ART, with expansive views over the River Tagus. Instruments and voices were amplified, but the performance coincided with an outdoor rock concert with rather more powerful amplification that often intruded. Still, Mónica Garnel's staging held the attention: in Patrícia Costa's designs, it looked attractive and had plenty of bustle without ever feeling hyperactive. The location also enabled Sérgio Moreira's lighting to create wonderful shadow effects on the museum's walls.

This wasn't a lavish production but it had wit, imagination and high spirits that more than compensated. Nor was the singing lacking in style. Not for the first time, Papageno (André Henriques) stole the show; this wasn't the bumbling idiot we often see but a warm-hearted companion who genuinely helped Tamino (a suitably ardent if somewhat reticent Frederico Projecto) and Pamina (Cecília Rodrigues).

Papageno had a mobile phone, because every production has to have one; yet there was a real sense of having fun with the opera—at one point Pamina was seen lounging on a sofa, nonchalantly chewing gum, and Patrícia Modesto's Queen of the Night seemed ready for Saturday night on the town, but still had the required vocal ping. Meanwhile, Sarastro (Nuno Dias) was a towering figure, his bass suitably resonant. The

orchestra, conducted by Tiago Oliveira, was somewhat reduced, but augmented to good effect by tuned percussion, while Papageno's pipes were replaced by harmonica, producing an appealing, almost down-home effect.

A gum-chewing Pamina; a Queen of the Night happily harmonizing with Sarastro at the work's climax; a 'monster and guard' apparently high on some illicit substance: *A Flauta Mágica* wasn't *The Magic Flute* as we know it, but it had energy, imagination and *joie de vivre*. It worked for me.

There wasn't much *joie de vivre* in the other event that I saw but that isn't a criticism. *Forças Ocultas* was part of Ópera Satélite, a fringe within the festival that also included a 'Rave Operatica': that, I would have liked to see. *Forças Ocultas* was not an opera but a 'performance by Gustavo Sumpta'—music theatre, in other words. It took place in Lisbon's ROMAN THEATRE, which dates from the first century AD. Since 2001 it has been an open-air part of a museum but its identity as a performance space is still evident.

Rows of chairs were set out for the audience; in front of us, on a rocky outcrop, a man, dressed in open-necked shirt and dark trousers, sat silent and motionless, as if he might be a museum staff member. After a while, a grating sound emerged over speakers placed around the space, soon joined by a sweet-voiced soprano (Catarina Molder, Operafest's artistic director), who was invisible to me. Finally, the man stood and began singing operatically in Italian, whispering conspiratorially or speaking in untranslated Portuguese (no surtitles here). The music was credited to the Portuguese composer Sara Ross. Every now and again, the man placed a hand deep into a trouser pocket and took it out again: part of the performance or a reflexive gesture from the performer?

That was just one mystery. There were more. At one point, what I'd assumed to be a cloth draped over a rock revealed itself as a man in a shroud. Naked, he draped himself across the rear of the 'stage', recalling Christ in a pietà. Meanwhile, the man and woman continued to sing, sometimes together, sometimes not. I later learnt that the performance was built around a Portuguese translation of Cesare Pavese's poem 'Verrà la morte e avrà i tuoi occhi'—'When death comes, it will have your eyes'. Another layer of mystery.

Was it a good performance? I don't know. Did I enjoy it? Yes, it was an intriguing show in an entrancing space. Although I could make little sense of what I was seeing or hearing, befuddlement is sometimes a positive critical response. The contrast between the two works I saw was stark: that's what you want from an opera festival. NICK KIMBERLEY

RUSSIA

St Petersburg

The MARYINSKY THEATRE is the home of Wagner in Russia and Valery Gergiev has made a point of programming his works regularly in St Petersburg. This year he devised a summer festival to celebrate the 210th anniversary of the composer's birth, featuring the *Ring* cycle and *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg*.

The latter work is not well known in Russia—it fell foul of the Germanophobia that was prevalent after World War I, when all German operas were banned from the repertoire of the imperial theatres. The length of the opera, its didactic nature, lofty moralizing, sentimentality and peculiarly German humour, make it a complex and potentially overwhelming challenge.