Rumpelstiltskin, Red Riding Hood – have I missed any?) protect the children enchantingly.

Hansel and Gretel are woken by Sarah Dufresne's persuasive Dew Fairy, and find they have both dreamed of 14 angels, producing paper cutouts to prove it. But then they stumble upon the Witch's house, puzzlingly not a gingerbread one in this production, but more like *Psycho's* Bates Motel, with a kitchen-knife slicing the roof. Rosie Aldridge is perhaps an over-compliant Witch (I have seen scarier ones), and willingly allows herself to be overturned into a Heath Robinson-like cauldron swilling with melted chocolate.

At which point a phalanx of brilliantly-trained (Cardinal Vaughan School and Grey Coat Hospital) little children emerge, brown-clad, as they have been turned into gingerbread girls and boys, groping around in dark glasses, as they have been blinded. Hansel's deft use of the Witch's magic gas-lighter restores their sight, and they, too, produce paper angel cutouts.

All ends happily, which is how this review began. But a word of praise, too, to the audience. Behaviour was immaculate; I saw only one phone flash all evening; the response was warm and wholehearted, with so many curtain-calls on this opening night. And standing ovation was there none, as there undoubtedly were all over the musicals in Shaftesbury Avenue – though this presentation certainly deserved one.

Christopher Morley

Handel und Gretl

Photo: Royal Opera House

Verdi: Rigoletto
Royal Opera House

Rigoletto is an opera that can at times teeter between seriousness and ridiculousness. The most obvious example is when Gilda, Rigoletto's daughter, gives her life to save the Duke, of whose beastliness she has become fully aware; or how she becomes considerably more attracted to the Duke when she believes him to be a penniless student – not my experience, alas. Oliver Mears' production, however, wants to be very serious: we are always seeing into bedrooms and given plenty of blood and sex – we even get to feast our eyes on a couple of huge Titians. Although we indeed begin with sumptuous colour and lavish costumes that inexplicably span centuries of style, the set becomes increasingly dark and spare and abstract until not the slightest hint of humour is left.

It can be a rather dull and empty staging at times, especially as the opera progresses. However, the final storm scene, with rain pouring down and lightning flashing, is at least very well done.

What actually gave this production serious depth and beauty was Amartuvshin Enkhbat's portrayal of Rigoletto. I have seen and heard none better. Not only does he have one of the most luxuriously dark and powerful of voices (one that could also reach quite remarkable high notes), his acting was equally brilliant. When he was pleading for his daughter's life while vile courtiers mocked and abused him, I felt all his pain. Enkhbat's performance made sense of the wonky, perverse world of the music and story. This was an extraordinarily believable and sympathetic Rigoletto: fragile, driven wild by feeling, with a noble, vengeful intensity so in contrast with the deformed and useless jester all see him as. A massive hunched presence, he always dominated the stage; even in the most crowded scenes, his such-obvious loneliness made it seem as if he were the only person really there. The performance was so good that the opera almost became Enkhbat's alone.

I say 'almost' as Pretty Yende as Gilda also made a strong impression. She used her beautiful voice in striking ways, with many virtuosic lines – including one extraordinarily high note – that were met with much applause. She almost made the daughter a believable character, which is a hard thing to do. Conductor Julia Jones helped give further emotional power to the story; the tempi had a sort of wildness at times, and the overall effect was thrilling.

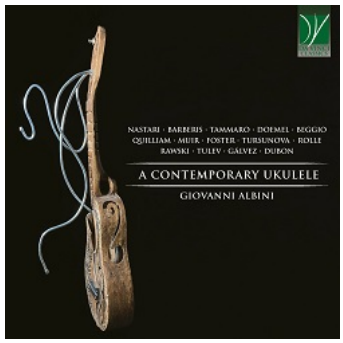
I was not entirely sure what to make of Stefan Pop's portrayal of the Duke – it was pure velvety sinisterness, the merriest villainy you can imagine. How could any woman find his charm anything other than sickly and repulsive? It was an absurd performance in many ways, and yet I rather enjoyed it. The more times I encounter *Rigoletto* the more I enjoy its fantastical character. Although it often gets advertised as a great realist opera, it is its utter strangeness, its abnormality, that for me makes it so compelling and moving.

Steven Watson

Johann Strauss II: Die Fledermaus
Bavarian State Opera Munich

For nearly 150 years, Johann Strauss' *Die Fledermaus* had been the reigning queen of all operettas. Countless thousands of audiences have laughed heartily at the same jokes, the same impossible situations and have waited for their favourite musical selections. When the Bavarian State Opera chose Barrie Kosky to stage its new production, seen in the Nationaltheater at its premiere on December 23, it could assume that it was not going to get anything traditional. Kosky stands out amongst contemporary directors in that he is musically highly

A Contemporary Ukulele
Giovanni Albini (ukulele)
rec. August-September 2021, Pavia, Italy
DA VINCI CLASSICS C00506 [59:17]



Availability

Da Vinci

Over the last several decades there has been growing interest in instruments that are not traditionally associated with classical music. The classical accordion is now thriving, with many excellent new players and recordings, as well as a growing repertoire. Listeners have been rediscovering the classical side of the mandolin, thanks to players like Avi Avital and Julien Martineau. But neither of those instruments is as unlikely as the ukulele. The accordion is almost a miniature organ, capable of a great deal of polyphony and colour. The mandolin has a long classical tradition to draw on. The ukulele has no tradition of classical composition, and its musical possibilities can seem deceptively limited. If it is to establish itself in the classical world, it will be thanks to ambitious albums like this one. I certainly hope that a serious art music tradition is developed; the ukulele appears to have become the most popular instrument in schools, and so it would be excellent were it available as a point of contact with the classical world.

A Contemporary Ukulele is the result of a "call for scores" by Giovanni Albini. Each work on the album is by a different contemporary composer, most of whom do not play the ukulele. I found some works to be more effective than others, but all the composers, possibly liberated by the lack of precedent, have written innovatively for the instrument, and I admire the diversity of compositional ideas. In *Dies Rainbow* composer Fabrizio Nastari takes the melody of *Somewhere over the Rainbow* and combines it with the *Dies Irae* chant. The result is curious indeed, with a middle section that sounds like medieval, two-part polyphony reimagined by Charles Ives. The outer sections more freely explore the themes, using strumming, arpeggios and percussive effect. Here, as in Matthew Quilliam's delightfully dark composition *The Department for the End of the World*, we hear the whimsy often associated with the ukulele developed into a more ambitious musical form.

In *Dies Rainbow* the ukulele can sound rather like a miniature guitar. This is true for some of the other compositions as well, such as in the surprisingly lyrical middle section of Oliver Dubon's *Reality's Edge*. However, one is soon disabused of this easy comparison with the guitar and instead notices the particular characteristics of the ukulele. Its four strings, generally tuned higher than the guitar, often give the music a lean clarity. Moreover, some composers make inventive use of the ukulele's re-entrant tuning, wherein the bottom string is commonly tuned an octave higher than one would expect. In *Blinter,* for example, Samantha Muir makes use of the ukulele's tuning to develop a short, attractive piece in which arpeggios transform in a kaleidoscopic way. We also hear multiple types of ukulele, from soprano to baritone, and early to modern. The differences are subtle but nevertheless noticeable, thanks in part to the excellent recording quality.

The standard of playing is very high, and many of the works make virtuosic demands of Albini. He meets the challenge brilliantly, whether it is in the rapid passages in Davide Tammaro's *The Messenger* or in the dense and angular music in the seven-minute *Intention Sector 3012* by Zulfiia Tursunova. But for me, the work which really shows off the instrument (and player) to the greatest musical effect is *Afterward* by Brandon Rolle. Rolle, who like most composers on this album is not a ukulelist, has fully assimilated the character and capabilities of the ukulele and created a work of considerable imaginative power. It flows and breathes beautifully, with strange but always compelling themes, employing all the colours of the ukulele – harmonics, glissandi, arpeggios, campanella effects, drones – yet always with musical purpose. If I were to recommend one work from the album to convince someone of the ukulele's potential, this would be it.

The one category of work I have yet to discuss is those works which use electronics. The results are to my ear mixed, but I have to confess to being generally disinclined towards mixing electronics with acoustic instrumentation. Other listeners may appreciate these

works, but for me most of them sounded gimmicky, using mere electronic effect (such as chorus or delay) on top of the ukulele. The better work is *Obscure Particles*, which instead uses electronics to fundamentally transform the instrument. Composer Andrea Beggio employs various extended techniques in conjunction with an electronic track, and by doing so creates a genuinely interesting soundworld in which the ukulele is almost unrecognisable.

This is a novel album that explores a new musical landscape, and so one should not expect every work to be a great success, but it will be greatly enjoyable for anyone who, like me, is interested in new music and new sounds. When I first listened through this album, I found myself at the end of each work smiling and wondering what would be next. The album showcases what Albini, in the booklet, calls the "musical promiscuity" of the ukulele. Some of it is very good music, and some of it I found more interesting than pleasing, but I admire the breadth of music commissioned, and I hope it will help establish a precedent on which a thriving subculture of classical ukulele music can be built.

Steven Watson

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DECEMBER 14, 2022

Karol Szymanowski (1882-1937)
Stabat Mater (1926)
Krzysztof Penderecki (1933-2020)
Dies Irae (1967)
Threnody to the Victims of Hiroshima (1961)
Ewa Iżykowska (soprano), Elena Moşuc (soprano), Annette Markert (mezzo soprano), Zachos Terzakis (tenor), Anton Scharinger (tenor), Stephen Roberts (bass)
Chorus sine nomine, Wiener Konzertchor
ORF VIenna Radio Symphony Orchestra/Michael Gielen
rec. 1995-2000, Konzerthaus Wien
ORFEO C210311 [60]

Szymanowski's *Stabat Mater* is, for me, his masterpiece. Reading Jens F. Laurson's liner notes, I was pleased to discover that upon finishing the last movement Szymanowski reportedly exclaimed, 'At last, I have written something really beautiful!' Szymanowski has certainly written other very beautiful works, but there is

something particularly enchanted – even miraculous – about the *Stabat Mater*. Its duality of Polish folk music and modernism, combined with an intensely personal interpretation of the text, resulted in one of the most colourful and passionate settings ever written.

I am usually ambivalent about Penderecki, whose *Dies Irae* and *Threnody to the Victims of Hiroshima* follow the Stabat Mater, yet listening to this album my feelings were reversed; the performance of the *Stabat Mater* is underwhelming, while the *Dies Irae* is so powerful – one of the most frighteningly powerful recordings I've heard, and impossible to be ambivalent about.

In the *Stabat Mater,* Gielen focuses on the colour and neglects the passion. He lives up to his reputation for bringing out details, but to my ear he misunderstands the overall music. The mysterious orchestral counterpoint in the first movement is played matter-of-factly; its harmonic strangeness is emphasised at the expense of its lyricism. When the soprano comes in, the melody has little of the tender, other-worldly character that it ought to possess. We should have a sense of Mary, by the cross, and the tragic, perplexing majesty of this event and of life and death generally (after all, Szymanowski wrote the work partly as a response to the death of his niece and the grief of his sister). The last movement, which is the most beautiful culmination, is played in a similarly plain way. The music needs more of a Romantic flavour – more visceral and indulgent – than Gielen gives it.

Gielen has gone for an interpretation that is more dramatic than personal. This does result in some interesting ideas. For example, whereas I had previously thought of the fifth movement as magnificent, Gielen instead opted for strident – brutal, even. Stephen Roberts, baritone, is almost yelling at us, and when the orchestra and choir all come in at the end, with tremolo strings and timpani and tubular bells, it is like a great threatening march. Although the works were recorded five years apart, it is as if Gielen is anticipating the *Dies Irae* by Penderecki that will soon

follow. It is a compelling way of playing the movement, and arguably congruent with the text, which ends “Lest I be consumed burned by flames / through you, O Virgin, may I be defended / on the day of judgement.”

This is neither the best nor the worst performance I’ve heard, yet neither is it mediocre; it is unbalanced but interesting. The singing is nonetheless very good, though sometimes feels constrained by the interpretation. I would recommend it to those wanting to hear a different take on the work. For those new to the work, try instead the recording by the Russian State Symphony Orchestra and Cappella, conducted by Valeri Polyansky (catalogue no. CHAN S9937). While Gielen captures the work’s strangeness, Polyansky and the Russian players and singers he conducts go deeper and capture the work’s mystery, its connection to the transcendent. Simon Rattle has also made a very fine recording (catalogue no. EMI CLASSICS 5145762), especially if you would prefer a more energetic interpretation.

The performance of Penderecki’s *Dies Irae* is much more impressive. The work was commissioned to mark the unveiling of the International Monument to the Victims of Fascism at the former Auschwitz-Birkenau concentration camp. The premiere of the *Dies Irae* took place there in 1967. This places it during the first phase of Penderecki’s compositional life, when his work was at its most intensely avant-garde. In the first movement, Lamentatio, we encounter a spare and apocalyptic soundworld. Out of it emerges a trembling, distressed solo soprano. The female choir then wails; the male choir chants darkly (unfortunately there is no translation of the text in the booklet, so I only had the vaguest idea what they are singing). The music is punctuated by brief explosions of timpani and cymbals and brass. Monotonal passages are used throughout to build the intensity.

The second movement, Apocalypsis, is a nightmare in sound. Whispering, chattering, shouting – it bears many similarities with Penderecki’s *St Luke Passion*, written the previous year. A siren

cuts through the noise, then is heard alone in glissando descent, fading into the distance. There is brief silence, and the choir and orchestra erupt. More pauses, then wailing – the performance is captivatingly violent, with the wildest changes in dynamics. Afterwards, bells chime and chants layer on top of each other; the third and last movement, Apotheosis, has begun. It is by far the shortest movement, almost a last desperate cry. Indeed, it ends with a plea: 'let us try to live', followed by, finally, a softly-chanted 'corpora parvulorum', or children's corpses. This is a piece of sustained horror, which might in other contexts be excessive; however, it is hard to think of any other response to the Nazi death camps. I found moments genuinely frightening, and I did not want to listen to it twice.

Threnody to the Victims of Hiroshima makes less of an impact, though it is conducted and performed equally superbly. Its nine minutes of extreme, yet highly expressive, orchestral writing remains compelling, but it possibly suffers from coming after a work such as the *Dies Irae*. I think it may have to do with the absence of the human voice. *Threnody's* tone clusters, quarter tones, string slaps, and various other extended techniques, can never be as horrible, as desperate, as imploring as sorrowful voices.

In *Dies Irae*, Gielen unleashes an emotional strength that he never really found in the *Stabat Mater* – you are unlikely to find a more impressive recording. The latter, despite being the far more luscious work, comes across as relatively cold and distant. Nevertheless, Gielen's interpretation brings out some aspects that will interest those familiar with the work.

Steven Watson

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