**Donizetti - Anna Bolena New York, Met, 2011**



*1. Act One  2. Act Two*   Interpretes:   Ildar Abdrazakov (Henry VIII)  Anna Netrebko (Anna Bolena)  Ekaterina Gubanova (Jane Seymour)  Stephen Costello (Percy)  Tamara Mumford (Smeaton)   Metropolitan Opera Orchestra and Choir  Marco Armiliato - director

In 1957, when Maria Callas prepared to take on the role of Donizetti's Anne Boleyn — "Anna Bolena," in opera terms — she worked for months beforehand with a coach; with the conductor, Gianandrea Gavazzeni; and with the stage director, Luchino Visconti. Callas was the greatest soprano star of the time and a sure box-office hit, but her main concern was getting the role right.

In 2011, Anna Netrebko, the soprano superstar du jour, has started taking on Anna Bolena herself -- first at the Vienna State Opera in April, and now at the Metropolitan Opera, where she opened the season in the company's first-ever production of the opera on Monday night. Netrebko is today's most popular international soprano, and has been hailed, like Callas before her, as a great singing actress. Yet her "Anna Bolena" showed none of the detailed work and care that made Callas's so memorable. Monday's performance was littered with missed intonations, smeared runs, and a good deal of running about stage with clasped hands, a move that evidently qualifies as operatic acting in many people's books.

Netrebko has a beautiful voice, and though it sometimes lacked the stamina for this long evening there was one moment on Monday when it really shone. In the aria in the final scene, when the character is lapsing in and out of madness, she sat back and let her signature limpid, round, melting tone pour out. The audience, delighted finally to have something to applaud, rewarded her with a deserved ovation, and the singer acknowledged their applause with a warm smile. Netrebko is not someone who worries too much about staying in character.

For the rest -- oh, for the kind of care that La Scala lavished on Donizetti's lengthy opera about Henry VIII's court. "Anna Bolena" is a high-maintenance piece in which Donizetti worked to integrate drama and music and move away from 1830s operatic convention: long and slightly static, it needs a lot of TLC to get it on stage convincingly. But the Met seemed to go out of its way to support the allegation of its erstwhile head, Rudolf Bing, that the opera was "an old bore."

It would have helped to cast singers who were actually suited to the parts: the first act, in particular, bore some of the trappings of an apprentice cast. (Indeed, the best showing came from an alum of the Met's young artist program, Tamara Mumford, who showed a dark-toned voice in the pants role of the page/musician Smeaton.) The tenor Stephen Costello, almost 30, who sang the part of Percy (the man Anna threw over to marry the King), again showed the reasons he has been hailed as promising with a supple, lyric tenor that grew increasingly confident in melodic lines; unfortunately, it did not include either stamina or top notes. The Met has been grooming the bass Ildar Abdrazakov, who sang Enrico (Henry VIII), but star quality has failed so far to materialize, which left us on Monday with a youthful cipher of no particular vocal impact in lieu of a scene-chewing villain.

Casting Ekaterina Gubanova as Jane (Giovanna) Seymour, whom Enrico wants to marry once he's gotten rid of Anna, was a stopgap measure, since the originally scheduled Giovanna, Elina Garanca, pulled out of the production due to pregnancy; but the role calls for a voice a couple of sizes larger than Gubanova's, though she exerted herself manfully and improved in the second half, in her duet with Anna, to give her best singing of the night.

All of the singers would have benefited from a good drilling in bel canto style, but they weren't going to get it from Marco Armiliato, a journeyman conductor who gave an undistinguished, heavy-handed reading in the pit.

There wasn't even any help to be had from the director David McVicar, whose brand of realism was not a good fit for the demands of Italian bel canto. Robert Jones's sets and Jenny Tiramani's costumes limned the Tudor court in dark shades of gray and black with touches of red -- the default operatic color palette -- and placed the action in the ubiquitous netherworld of historical accuracy with a modern twist, which meant large white walls moving around the stage to create random-seeming spaces within the palace. McVicar, too, added gratuitous modern touches: having Smeaton veritably throw himself down on the Queen's fainting body, or, at the end, having the mad Anna twist up her hair as if about to hang herself by it — to say nothing of

having the whole set rise up to reveal a lower level, which did nothing other than demonstrate the technical resources the Met has on display.

The whole thing seemed like an idea that had worked well on paper and gone wrong in practice. We'll get the leading soprano to open the season! We'll put in some young singers to show that we're grooming future stars! We'll bring in a director known for his psychological penetration, since after all this was a plumb role for Callas, the great actress! Alas, what this all added up to was an evening that represented what too many members of the glittering opening-night crowd probably expect of opera: something long, dull, and not very believable, with a lot of gesticulation and, under it all, some pretty music.

Even Netrebko, the big star, still comes off as a willing novice, someone who doesn't always live up to her considerable potential. If she approached the part with the focus and commitment of a Maria Callas, or if opera companies today actually invested time in helping singers to master the music they're performing, the evening might have been a whole lot better. ---Washington Post

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