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Front cover

Jennifer Walshe's MARS in Dublin, with Nina Guo, Jade Phoenix, Sarah Richmond and Doreen Curran (see pp. 1667-8; photo: Pat Redmond)

Opera

with
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and Rodney Milnes*

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Anckarström, whose ‘Eri tu’ was alternately passionately angry and grief-stricken. Ulrica’s doom-laden palm-reading was tellingly done by Kristin Darragh. Some of the most consistently engaging singing came from Natasha Te Rupe Wilson’s Oscar, and Samuel McKeever and Morgan-Andrew King were a resoundingly dark-toned duo as Ribbing and Horn. The chorus, whether playing the king’s allies or his enemies, acquitted themselves sonorously.

PETER MECHEN

SWITZERLAND

Zuoz

The fate of endangered languages has become a topic of keen interest in recent years. Switzerland has one too—Rumansh, descended from Latin, which is now the mother tongue of just 0.4 per cent of the country’s population. But the Swiss have found an ingenious means of promoting it: opera.

The company OPERA ENGIADINA, now thriving in its sixth year of existence, puts on a touring show at least once a year. This year it was a ‘family opera’, *Uorsin* by Marius Felix Lange, based on Alois Carigiet’s children’s book *A Bell for Ursli*. Lange is one of the most often-performed German composers of music theatre today. His idiom is contemporary but accessible, occasionally Brittenesque, his music skilfully scored and with moments of real beauty (such as the scene where Uorsin emerges from sleep). *Uorsin* was originally commissioned as a German-language opera by Theater Basel and had been reworked into Rumansh for this production (seen on June 13). The Camerata da Puntraschigna played under the baton of Claudio Danuser, the Intendant of Opera Engiadina, and the production was directed by Riikka Läser.

The story is situated firmly in the Engadine and culminates in the Chalandamarz festival, a real event celebrated here on March 1 every year when the local boys process through their villages, singing and clanging large cowbells to drive out the winter. But *Uorsin* is also a timeless tale of a defeat, a journey and a victory. Little Uorsin becomes a laughing stock when he’s fobbed off with a tiny bell on the day before the procession. So he treks up the mountain to bring back the biggest bell of all, and on his return he’s fêted and put at the head of the procession. The cast features three adults, all of them here experienced singers often seen in the bigger houses (Gianna Lunardi as the mother, Chasper-Curò Mani as the father, and Flurin Caduff doubling up as the uncle and the spirit of winter). The children’s roles include various animals and trees; their costumes and masks—by Briony Langmead—were truly exquisite.

Uorsin stands or falls on its two leads: Uorsin and his sister Flurina, sung here by the actual brother-and-sister team of Jöri and Luisa Würms. The amount of text involved meant sourcing all the children from among the native speakers of the local Rumansh primary schools—no easy task, given that the total Rumansh population is about 35,000. But the kids did a splendid job, especially Jöri Würms, who at just 11 already has real stage presence and mastered the alternation of singing and speaking with ease.

The performance I attended was packed. Those around me were clearly native speakers, for they giggled in enjoyment at the humorous lines in Rumansh. Lange ends his opera with the popular Chalandamarz song, and everyone in the audience here joyfully sang along before jumping to their feet to applaud. Opera in Rumansh is clearly a community endeavour, and all the stronger for it.

CHRIS WALTON

TAIWAN

Taipei

For its annual semi-staged opera production this year, the TAIWAN PHILHARMONIC presented two performances of *Der fliegende Holländer* in Taipei's NATIONAL CONCERT HALL on July 11 and 13, with a single interval after Act 1. The consistently fine cast was led by Iwona Sobotka, whose portrayal of Senta could only be described as sensational. Sobotka seems so far to have avoided any of the major Wagner roles, but her glorious, gleaming voice, projected with power but without force, marks her as a potential Brünnhilde or Isolde. The voice was completely even from top to bottom and sailed over the heaviest orchestration. Every note was perfectly focused and in tune, there was no trace of a wobble, and she projected the merest thread of a pianissimo with skill. Her Dutchman, Simon Bailey, is a veteran of Wagner roles, and he too possessed the commanding presence that rivets attention, right from his opening line. His great monologue could have used more contrast between episodes, but the power of his darkly coloured projection largely overcame this omission. As Daland, Richard Wiegold convincingly looked and sang like a weathered old seaman but, lacking the power of Sobotka and Bailey, his voice was at times lost amid an orchestra that the conductor Jun Märkl too often allowed to blare and go unchecked in volume, a problem that affected the sweet-voiced Mika Kaneko (Mary) as well.

Taiwan did itself proud in the roles of Erik and the Steersman. Fernando Wang portrayed Erik as determined to make his case with Senta as forcefully as possible, and he did so with the utmost sincerity. Han Wu's clear, youthful voice as the Steersman was perfectly suited to a young man pining for his sweetheart, bringing elegance and radiant lyricism to his ballad.

The Taiwanese chorus singers came from four different choirs, the men singing lustily, although often swallowing the ends of phrases, and the women offering just the right degree of enthusiasm and clarity as they mended the sail that had been lowered from Act 1.

Jean-Michel Cricqui directed the proceedings, all of which took place at the rear of the extended stage. There was much running to and from the wings, and there was too much contrived waving of arms and swaying of bodies from the chorus, but otherwise Cricqui used the limited space he had to work with intelligently. One could only wonder, though, if it was intentional that Erik and Senta barely looked at each other in their big scene in Act 2. The set consisted of a single large sail for Act 1 and the closing of Act 3, against which were projected images of the Dutchman's ship. To create atmosphere, there were also frequent projections of heavy rain, heaving waves and flashing lights against the back wall.

ROBERT MARKOW