

Frontier Justice

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Puccini's place in the operatic firmament has hardened into unassailability during the past century, yet there any many – the present reviewer included – who approach his oeuvre somewhat dutifully, forced by the weight of popular opinion to concede his mastery without quite feeling it. For such sceptics, the Staatsoper's new production of *La Fanciulla del West* was an unexpected delight. Although it featured three strong principals and a reasonably focussed staging, its persuasive energy came primarily from the eruptions of orchestral emotion summoned by Antonio Pappano, who spent much of the evening heating up individual scenes to the point where they transcended melodrama and achieved their own particular euphoria.

Steier, La Fanciulla del West
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**Berlin, domingo,
13 de junio de
2021.** Staatsoper
Unter den Linden.
Puccini: La
Fanciulla del West.

Lydia Steier, director. Anja Kampe (Minnie), Marcelo Álvarez (Dick Johnson), Michael Volle (Jack Rance), Stephan Rügamer (Nick), Lukasz Golinski (Sonora), Jan Martinik (Ashby), and Grigory Shkarupa (Jake Wallace). Men of the Staatsoperchor. Staatskapelle Berlin. Antonio Pappano, conductor



Certainly the audience was primed for catharsis of any kind: it had been nearly eight months since the second wave of the Covid pandemic had forced the Staatsoper to close, and of their new productions planned for the season, only one – Luca Francesconi's *Quartett* – had taken place before a live audience. They were able to live-stream a number of operas and concerts, but after nearly an entire season of music on the computer screen, a chance to experience the real thing again seemed all the more welcome. Between this performance and the Deutsche Oper's new *Rheingold*, which had its première the evening before, Berlin audiences were welcomed back in appropriately grand style.



Grigory Shkarupa (Jake Wallace) and Ensemble. Puccini's 'La fanciulla del West'. Antonio Pappano, conductor. Lydia Steier, director. Staatsoper Unter den Linden, June

Although based on an authentically American text – by David Belasco, a native Californian whose career began in the provincial theatres of the Old West – *La Fanciulla* remains a familiar operatic story transposed to an exotic locale; for a European audience of the early twentieth century the western setting would have been no more or less fantastical than the imagined orient of *Butterfly* or *Turandot*. Director Lydia Steier seemed to have followed Puccini's notion of locale as mere spectacle, updating the action to an indefinite period in the later twentieth century constructed almost entirely of signifiers: the pick-up truck, the crates of Olympia beer and

the chorus of dudes with flannel shirts and guns situated us within an immediately identifiable redneck milieu, but the German-style Biergarten tables, the rhinestone cowboys and the fun-fair bulbs on the Polka bar sign seemed calculated to keep the staging untethered from a definitive time or place.

Throughout the evening Ms Steier provided the audience with dazzling moments and burlesque touches, from the *deus ex machina* entrance of rambling troubadour Jake Wallace, to the illuminated Nudie suits, to a stage fight in which two of the fighters were actually set on fire; yet these flourishes were all somewhat surplus to the requirements of the story. In this way the staging seemed a direct continuation of the Staatsoper's recent tendency – visible in 2019's *Samson et Délila*, last year's visually glorious but conceptually vacant *Rosenkavalier* and this year's unforgivably bland *Figaro* – toward slick, almost cinematic productions with conspicuously high production values that, while not strictly traditional, feel overwhelmingly safe. Even the scenes of modern frontier violence – at least two hangings, some shootings, and several menacingly-held baseball bats – remained disconnected from anything that might have given them resonance; it was cartoon violence, all stagecraft and no edge. The simple interlude between Acts Two and Three, which featured a succession of men walking slowly across the front of the stage with loaded guns while the sound of a snowstorm filled the hall, was far more sinister than the elaborate scenes that followed.

Had the incursions of pure spectacle been less geared toward showing off and more tightly integrated into the central action, the staging might have been remarkable. Instead what emerged was a reasonably orthodox treatment of the story overlaid with a veneer of disconnected flash. It was, in some ways, a shame, as Ms Steier handled the busy crowd scenes of the first and third acts with confidence, and displayed an even greater assurance in the succession of encounters between Minnie and her two suitors in the second. Admittedly, the sexually frustrated Dick Johnson who appeared in Act Two seemed at odds with the hesitant gentleman-bandit of the first act, and at the end it was not especially clear why Minnie had chosen to run off with him; but there were enough dramatic sparks generated in the scenes between Minnie and Jack Rance that such implausibilities ceased to matter.

Minnie is one of the few Puccini heroines who loses neither her dignity nor her life in the course of the opera, and the combination of a demanding vocal part and the relative absence of tragic folly may explain why the role has attracted comparably fewer champions over the years. Anja Kampe seemed a good fit for the part, and she gave a credible rendering of the frontier lady tough enough to handle the drunks but vulnerable enough to fall for the advances of a passing stranger. Admittedly there were moments in the first act where she seemed a touch too emphatic, attacking high notes and large emotional cues with a startling vigour that shifted attention from the performance to the performer. However, these may have just been opening night adjustments, as she had settled more firmly into the



Natalia Skrycka (Wowkle), Mia Selka de Paiva (Kind) and Žilvinas Miškinis (Billy Jackrabbit). Puccini's 'La fanciulla del West'. Antonio Pappano, conductor. Lydia Steier, director. Staatsoper Unter den Linden, June 2021. © 2021 by Martin Sigmund / Staatsoper Unter den Linden.

character by the second act, delivering her lines with similar power but much finer gradation.



Jan Martinik (Ashby), Michael Volle (Jack Rance), Viktor Rud (Happy), Florian Hoffmann (Harry) and Anja Kampe (Minnie). Puccini's 'La fanciulla del West'. Antonio Pappano, conductor. Lydia Steier, director. Staatsoper Unter den Linden, June 2021. © © 2021 by Martin Sigmund / Staatsoper Unter den Linden.

Of the three principals, Marcelo Álvarez was most successful at integrating a strain of lyricism into an otherwise dramatic role. His Dick Johnson stood apart from the patrons of the Polka bar not only in sartorial terms – his crisp black suit put him immediately at odds with the jeans and flannel around him – but in his suave, supple delivery, especially his elegantly sculpted expressions of feeling for Minnie at the end of the first act. As Jack Rance, Michael Volle distinguished himself as much through intelligence as force; he was the most charismatically dangerous figure on stage, yet his glowering, contemptuous manner with the miners made his brief flashes of humanity all the more disarming. He was also an ideal vocal partner for Ms Kampe, and in an opera full of grandly-wrought emotion, the palpable malice in the scenes between Minnie and Rance emerged as perhaps the most authentic; for all the production's visual flash, it was the simple confrontation between these two forces that provided the evening with its greatest excitement.

As fine as the three principals were, one was left with the suspicion that it was Antonio Pappano, down in the pit, spurring the production to its greatest heights. Certainly Mr Pappano held nothing back in his reading: Puccini's score, for all its dazzle, is not without moments of facile melodrama, and had Mr Pappano attempted to downplay or justify them, the whole evening might have lapsed into awkwardness or indifference. Instead Mr Pappano embraced the raw, occasionally violent passions of the music, applying the fire of his inspiration to even the purplest passages until they glowed pure white. As the music grew more intense, one's reservations were gradually stripped away until one was left with a strange admiration for the force of Puccini's conviction. The Staatskapelle, perhaps due to the excitement of playing for a live audience for the first time in eight months, sounded especially invigorated, providing a spirited response to Mr Pappano's fervent direction. If the staging had done little to address or subvert the obvious shortcomings in the text, the music nonetheless allowed us to emerge from the theatre reminded of the joyous feeling that comes with experiencing a great performance in a real hall.