

Solid Gold

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Mozart was only 14 years old when he set out for Milan to kick-start his career as an opera composer. Although the operatic reforms of Gluck were starting to make their presence felt in Paris, Mozart's first work for the Milanese stage was very much tailored to the tastes of its time and audience; yet if *Mitridate, Re di Ponto* adheres largely to the formulae of *opera seria* and offers only brief glimpses of the masterpieces still to come, it is nonetheless a work of great vigour and dazzling vocal showpieces.

The new production of *Mitridate* at the Staatsoper Unter den Linden – which appeared as the second new production at this year's Barocktage after being postponed in 2020 due to the Covid pandemic – let none of the opera's potential go to waste: between the subtle staging of Satoshi Miyagi and the generous performances from Les Musiciens du Louvre and Marc Minkowski, the evening offered a continuous argument for the qualities – both musical and dramatic – of a work often dismissed as a minor entry in Mozart's operatic oeuvre.



Mozart: *Mitridate, Re di Ponto*. Marc Minkowski, conductor. Satoshi Miyagi, director. Berlin, Staatsoper Unter den Linden, December 2022. © 2022 by Bernd Uhlig.

Miyagi, *Mitridate*
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Staatsoper Unter
den Linden.

Mozart: *Mitridate, Re di Ponto*. Satoshi Miyagi, director. Pene Pati (*Mitridate*), Ana Maria Labin (*Aspasia*), Angela Brower (*Sifare*), Paul-Antoine Bénos-Dijan (*Farnace*), Sarah Aristidou (*Ismene*), Sahy Ratia (*Marzio*), and Adriana Bignagni Lesca (*Arbate*). Les Musiciens du Louvre. Marc Minkowski, conductor



Although the story of the opera – adapted from Racine's tragedy – takes place in the kingdom of Pontus at the time of the Mithridatic wars, Satoshi Miyagi transferred the action effortlessly to a world of his own creation. The staging unfolded on a single, deceptively simple set consisting of four long tiers flanked on either side by staircases that allowed the characters to move between levels. If the arrangement seemed schematic on first glance, it was far from static: the upright panels on each level could be spun around, allowing not only for sudden entrances and exits, but also for subtle changes in backdrop (the large scenic paintings – the palace interior, a bamboo grove and a mountainous exterior – were remarkably elegant, drawing on a muted palette of desaturated golds, yellows and bronzes).

The formal rigour of the set and the costumes of the opening scenes – in which the brothers

Sifare and Farnace were attired in full samurai armour – suggested that the story had been transplanted to feudal Japan, but the arrival of military officers dressed in twentieth-century military uniform brought a quick end to any notion that the staging would be a mere period piece. And while Mr Miyagi offered allusions to Kabuki theatre – most notably in the highly stylised movements of Aspasia in the first act – it was only one of many approaches employed to illuminate the action. Indeed, for all its oriental surfaces, the staging just as often recalled the strange world of classical Greek theatre from which Racine so often drew his inspiration.

If the staging was wide-ranging in its dramatic and chronological ingredients, the diverse elements were united by a level of subtlety one does not often encounter on the Berlin stage. Other directors may have felt compelled to draw attention to the cleverly anachronistic use of costumes, but Mr Miyagi wove them seamlessly into the fabric of his storytelling. It is also difficult to imagine a staging that could employ so much gold without coming across as excessive or flashy; and while pretty much everything on the stage was gilded – from the armour and body paint worn by the brothers, to the brocade of Aspasia’s gowns, to the set itself – the effect was one of burnished elegance. Even the dance of the soldiers during the march announcing Mitridate’s arrival in the first act was tastefully restrained.



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Mr Miyagi’s penchant for subtlety extended to his handling of the action which flirted, at times, with absolute stasis but was never careless or disinterested. Indeed he managed the nearly impossible task of highlighting the principal singer in each scene – often going so far as to ‘freeze’ the background action for the duration of an aria – without sacrificing narrative momentum. The slow, contemplative pace of the action helped to draw one completely into the world of the staging; but, having drawn us in, Mr Miyagi was content to let the singers do the rest, adding subtle visual flourishes to certain scenes, but never cluttering the stage with unnecessary activity, or demanding excess movement from the characters.



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The result was a staging that, in the spirit of *opera seria*, allowed each singer the time and space to showcase their vocal abilities. As Aspasia, Ana Maria Labin opened the evening with a captivating ‘*Al destin, che la minaccia*’ that set an almost impossibly high bar for the rest of the performance; its daring leaps and restless flights of coloratura – all delivered with exquisite poise – represented some of the finest singing of the evening. If the opera contained no other arias that offered quite the same trials of technique, Ms Labin reached similar heights in ‘*Nel grave tormento*’, in which she alternated between long phrases of convincing emotional weight and faster sections of brilliant animation.

Angela Brower seemed less interested in vocal pyrotechnics than in the emotional complexities that challenged Sifare's essential nobility, and her finest moments arose from the combination of long, fluid lines and carefully rendered nuance; 'Lungi da te', with its natural-horn accompaniment, was not merely one of the evening's highlights, but emerged as the emotional core of the opera itself. Sarah Aristidou brought a voice of delicate weight and exceptionally clear tone to the arias of Ismene. Countertenor Paul-Antoine Bénos-Dijan gave spirited readings of Farnace's early arias – 'Son reo; l'error confesso' had a pleasing edge of insolence – but it was his tender phrasing and quiet resolve that gave his aria of redemption 'Già dagli occhi' its distinction. And Pene Pati brought a mixture of quiet authority and theatrical flair to the title role, with passages of regal command – notably in 'Se di lauri' – punctuated by charged emotion and sustained high notes.

Throughout the evening Marc Minkowski conveyed the sense not only of being in total control of the music, but also of being able to find exactly the right mood for each aria; under his direction, Les Musiciens du Louvre delivered performances charged with joyous spontaneity, and one was left with the impression that both ensemble and conductor were genuinely thrilled to be sharing Mozart's score with us. Yet it was neither the spirited playing of the orchestra, the enthusiasm of the singers, nor even the restrained splendour of the staging that could claim sole responsibility for the success of the production: it was rather the perfect balance between its various elements that transformed this *Mitridate* into a subtle, stylish, and thoroughly engaging evening.