

## Several Sins

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By the time *Il Trittico* had its première in 1918, Puccini had been pondering the idea of three one-act operas designed to be performed together for over a decade; however the uneven quality of the individual works all but guaranteed that each one would go on to enjoy a very different life of its own. The Deutsche Oper Berlin, for their first new production of the 2023/24 season, presented the three operas – *Il Tabarro*, *Suor Angelica* and *Gianni Schicchi* – together in their intended order; and while the evening boasted some winning performances – most notably the Lairetta and Angelica of Mané Galoyan and the Schicchi of Misha Kiria – the staging of Pinar Karabulut, for all its visual brilliance, could not quite make a convincing case for *Il Trittico* being anything greater than the sum of its flawed parts.

Puccini had initially conceived of the cycle as containing three episodes based on passages from the *Divine Comedy*, and while the operas all deal in some way with the notion of sin, in the end only the figure of Gianni Schicchi was lifted from his home in Hell's eighth circle. Yet the story of the Florentine rogue who ingeniously defrauds an obnoxious family of their uncle's fortune is inspired enough to make one wonder if Puccini had not perhaps missed his calling, and that instead of devoting his career to sentimental shockers, he should rather have channelled his disdain and love of human suffering into caustic comic parables. Indeed, the gleeful energy of *Gianni Schicchi* – the only one of the three tales to achieve any measure of universality – has the unfortunate effect of laying bare the facile melodrama of *Suor Angelica* and, in *Il Tabarro*, the sensationalism so often passed off as realism.

In her staging, Ms Karabulut sought to bring unity to the diverse materials of *Il Trittico* by returning to Puccini's original inspiration in Dante, but also by interpreting the title of the cycle – the Triptych – in its most painterly sense. The stage was framed by a simple construction that suggested that frames one might find around a late-Medieval altarpiece, albeit in a vivid red belonging wholly to the recent half-century; and the three operas, although linked by the same basic rotating-stage set, seemed to follow a Dantean spiritual



Karabulut, *Il Trittico* © 2023 by Eike Walkenhorst / DOB

**Berlin, sábado, 30 de septiembre de 2023.** Deutsche Oper Berlin. Puccini: *Il Trittico*. Pinar Karabulut, director. Misha Kiria (Michele, Gianni Schicchi), Carmen Giannattasio (Giorgetta), Mané Galoyan (Suor Angelica, Lairetta), Jonathan Tetelman (Luigi), Violeta Urmana (La Zia Principessa), and Annika Schlicht (La Frugola, La Suora Zelatrice, Zita). Choir and Orchestra of the Deutsche Oper Berlin. John Fiore, conductor

progress, from the dank hell of *Il Tabarro*, through the purgatorial uncertainty of *Suor Angelica*, and arriving at the distinctly warped paradise of *Gianni Schicchi*. As starting points go it was undeniably intriguing, but all too often the conceptual foundations seemed mismatched with the stories they were intended to support; and while Ms Karabulut brought a vibrant, pop-inspired visual sensibility to the stage, it was not always enough to carry the narrative or mask the deficiencies in the source material.



Puccini, *Il Trittico: Il Tabarro*. John Fiore, conductor. Pinar Karabulut, director. Berlin, Deutsche Oper, September 2023. © 2023 by Eike Walkenhorst / DOB.

*Il Tabarro* seemed the least well-suited to the staging's approach. The story, a simple tale of infidelity and bloody revenge, relies almost solely on the desperate squalor of its riverside locale and the hopelessness of its inhabitants for its dramatic effect. The staging, however, played out against a cavernous space with a pool of water at its centre, and the clash of mythical setting and realist melodrama proved jarring: at best it placed the emotions and desires of its characters within a disconcerting void; at worst it merely pointed up the banalities of the libretto. The use of colour was arresting – the darkness at the centre of the stage was surrounded by objects in cartoon shades of orange and purple, and even the shiny quality of the costumes was eye-catching until one realised

that the use of waterproof materials may have been employed solely to allow the characters to splash around in the central pool (which they did to the point where the splashing become devoid of any real effect). The stage imagery was not, however, enough to invest the story with any sense of meaning, and when the climactic murder had taken place, one felt neither the plight of the doomed lovers nor the futility of existence, but rather a vague sense of relief.

Although the visual mood lightened somewhat for *Suor Angelica* – the cavernous background was lifted to reveal an ambiguously stormy sky – the set remained the same. As the music started, the stage began to rotate, but instead of stopping to reveal a new set of structures against which the action could take place, it kept on spinning and spinning ... and it continued to spin at varying speeds for nearly the entire opera. There is no question that the ceaseless rotation of the stage offered a perfect visual metaphor for Angelica's private torments, but it grew tiresome quickly and after about five minutes one was desperate for it to stop. It is perhaps no coincidence that the best scene – the climactic confrontation between Angelica and her aunt – occurred when the stage had slowed almost to a halt.



Puccini, *Il Trittico: Suor Angelica*. John Fiore, conductor. Pinar Karabulut, director. Berlin, Deutsche Oper, September 2023. © 2023 by Eike Walkenhorst / DOB.

*Gianni Schicchi*, although considerably more enjoyable as a work of narrative drama, was also not without its maddening moments. The family of Buoso were a stylishly grotesque collection of blue- and green-faced pseudo-monsters lifted straight from twentieth century trash culture; and while the delightful rogue's gallery of avaricious goons would have been enough to carry the story, the staging insisted on pushing the physical comedy to the max.

There was not a moment when the characters weren't gesticulating wildly or falling over themselves, and while the audience seemed to respond to the barrage of pratfalls, after a while it began to seem just as relentless as the spinning stage in *Suor Angelica*. It was, in its own way, a tour de force of manic energy, but the family members were never allowed to settle down enough to allow the genuine mean-spiritedness of the libretto to emerge.



Puccini, *Il Trittico*: Gianni Schicchi. John Fiore, conductor. Pinar Karabulut, director. Berlin, Deutsche Oper, September 2023.  
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If *Gianni Schicchi* was nonetheless the most successful part of the evening it owed as much to the exuberance of the staging as to the show-stopping splendour of Mané Galoyan's 'O mio babbino caro' and the commanding presence of Misha Kiria's Schicchi. Mr Kiria also appeared as Michele in *Il Tabarro*, in which he delivered a performance of understated warmth and sympathy that turned suddenly to rage and menace on the discovery of Giorgetta's infidelity. But his haughty Schicchi was the greater achievement: his contempt for Buoso's family was palpable in nearly every line, his impersonation of the deceased Buoso was a perfect blend of expressive delivery and comic timing, and in his final address to the audience he shrugged off his own moral shortcomings

with such agreeable nonchalance that it was impossible not to grant him the indulgence he craved.

Mané Galoyan's 'O mio babbino caro' in *Gianni Schicchi* was so delicate and heartfelt that it seemed to have come from a different opera entirely; it was such an unexpectedly fine moment that it didn't much matter whether it was a genuine outpouring of feeling on Laretta's part or a naked attempt at manipulating her father; it worked equally well as both. But before that graceful interjection, Ms Galoyan had been the dominant force in *Suor Angelica*, bringing a tortured humility to the title role that exploded into a frenzy of emotion on learning of her son's death. While the ecstasies and terrors of her final scene were wholly convincing, it was the tender lament following the departure of Angelica's aunt that made the greatest impression: here Ms Galoyan delineated Angelica's sudden loss of everything with despairing softness.

Annika Schlicht, who appeared in all three operas (as La Frugola, La Suora Zelatrice and Zita) was on excellent form throughout; her Frugola especially brought a jolt of earthy personality to the reticent mood of *Il Tabarro*. Both Jonathan Tetelman and Carmen Giannattasio, as Luigi and Giorgetta, the doomed lovers of *Il Tabarro*, sounded a touch restrained in the earlier sections of the opera, but when they came together for their joint evocation of Belleville and inevitable love duet, the results were suitably majestic. Violeta Urmana, with stern presence and captivating low passages, brought necessary dramatic weight to the central confrontation in *Suor Angelica*.

John Fiore, who took over conducting duties from Sir Donald Runnicles at the very last minute, gave the evening the stable foundation it very much needed. If there was nothing overtly flashy in his readings, there were also very few indulgences: he could coax playing of great delicacy from the strings – as in the opening of *Suor Angelica* – and build to the explosive climaxes so essential to Puccini's operatic conception, all while remaining in the

service of the singers. His inobtrusive control was most evident in *Gianni Schicchi*, in which musical effervescence and taut pacing helped transform the evening into a triumph of comedy over tragedy.

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