

Recurring Obsessions

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The tale of a production delayed by several seasons due to the Covid pandemic should be familiar to most opera-goers by now, but the Deutsche Oper's new production of Tchaikovsky's *Pique Dame* – scheduled initially for Spring of 2020 – added an unfortunate twist: Graham Vick, the original director, died of complications related to Covid in 2021. Although the two principals – Martin Muehle and Sondra Radvanovsky – and conductor Sebastian Weigle remained in place, the direction was eventually taken over by Sam Brown; it is difficult to say how much of Sir Graham's preparations were incorporated into the final version, but the staging presented on the evening offered a respectful, stylish and fairly straightforward retelling of the story while maintaining an objective distance from its psychological and supernatural undercurrents.

The staging made no attempts to transpose or modernise the story. If it could not be described as traditional it was mostly because the sets and costumes were a grab-bag of modern riffs on eighteenth century themes. The set moved back and forth between ornate moulded panels and neon-edged abstraction – sometimes to good effect – and the furnishings ranged from convincingly palatial wrought iron gates to those clear acrylic oval-back chairs that were briefly the rage in the early 2010s.

If the dress worn by the Countess in the first scene could have been lifted from an old production of *Rosenkavalier* and the uniforms worn by the men seemed generically appropriate to pre-twentieth-century military officers, the demure, bespectacled Lisa and the sunglass-wearing promenaders of the first scene seemed to come from a different world entirely. But for all that the look of the staging was eclectic, its choices were rarely distracting, and occasionally inspired.

While the staging was never short on intellectual rigour, it was perhaps more notable for its brief scenes of highly-distilled drama than its network of thematic ideas. The finest moments arose invariably from the meeting of two individuals. Whenever there were too many people around the staging lapsed into stylised formality, as though meticulously

Brown, *Pique Dame*
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Tchaikovsky: *Pique Dame*. Sam Brown, director. Martin Muehle (Hermann), Sondra Radvanovsky (Liza), Doris Soffel (The Countess), Lucio Gallo (Tomsy), Thomas Lehman (Yeletsky), Chance Jonas-O'Toole (Chekalinsky), Padraic Rowan (Surin), Andrew Dickinson (Chaplitsky), Michael Bachtadze (Narumov), Jörg Schörner (Master of Ceremonies), Karis Tucker (Polina), Nicole Piccolomini (Governess), and Oleksandra Diachenko (Masha). Chorus and Orchestra of the Deutsche Oper Berlin. Sebastian Weigle, conductor





Tchaikovsky: Pique Dame. Sebastian Weigle, conductor. Sam Brown, director. Deutsche Oper Berlin, March 2024. © 2024 by Marcus Lieberenz.

synchronised movement was the only way of handling crowd scenes: both the opening promenade and the masked ball, with its awkward cavorting, seemed laboured. But when the scenes were reduced to essential moments of dramatic conflict – the doubt-charged love duet of Hermann and Liza in Scene 2, Hermann’s confrontation with the Countess in Scene 4, and Liza’s final, fateful meeting with Hermann in Scene 6 – the staging was able to find an effortless balance between expressive action and emotional authenticity.

The staging started to grow muddled only when it attempted to add extra layers of subtext and analysis. The opening scene featured a group of children playing soldiers tormenting a lone boy who wanted to play with his doll, and it was implied that the boy was in fact a young version of Hermann; the adult Hermann was similarly taunted by his fellow soldiers and overwhelmed by large crowds. While this childhood trauma may have explained his skittish behaviour, it offered little insight into his passion for Liza or his nascent obsession with gambling. The subsequent revelation that Hermann was a first-class stalker – although apparently not a very skilled one if he couldn’t even find out Liza’s name – served to obscure rather than clarify his nature. It often felt that the staging, unable to fathom the character, threw as many psychological explanations into the mix as possible, without bothering to determine if they all added up.

A far more problematic element of the staging was its over-reliance on Yakov Protazanov’s 1916 silent film adaptation of the Pushkin story on which Tchaikovsky’s opera is based. The entire staging was presented within the frame of a silent film and when the curtain came down between scenes there were black and white intertitles, complete with fake frame distress. (The fact that these intertitles also included quotes from essays on Pushkin by Dostoyevsky and Mikhail Gershenzon – along with a quote from Pushkin himself – added yet another layer of meta-theatrical analysis). In addition to the intertitles, snippets from the film appeared between acts, primarily Ivan Mosjoukine’s hypnotic stare intercut with the queen of spades and stacks of money (almost certainly a reference to Mosjoukine’s role in Kuleshov’s famous experiments with montage); there were also scenes from the film within the staging itself, most notably to illustrate Tomsky’s narration of the Countess’ early years in Paris, and the Countess’ own reminiscences.



Tchaikovsky: Pique Dame. Sebastian Weigle, conductor. Sam Brown, director. Deutsche Oper Berlin, March 2024. © 2024 by Marcus Lieberenz.

Appropriation and reconfiguration are undoubtedly valid artistic strategies, but in this context they felt a lot like cheating: by using Protazanov’s film to illustrate the same story the staging was, in effect, ceding responsibility for the creation of its own images. Although there was an attempt to justify the presence of the film by including a film projector in the Countess’ room – which gave her attempted seduction of Hermann an undeniable hint of *Sunset Boulevard* – it didn’t quite work. Moreover, the cluttered, uncertain imagery on the stage suffered by constant comparison with the inevitably richer images borrowed from the

film: it was only after the death of the countess at the end of the fourth scene that the staging started to make less use of the film, and the action on stage, as though freed from the weight of influence, started to flourish under its own power. It is no coincidence that the evening's most successful scene – the final meeting of Liza and Hermann – made no reference to the film at all.



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The dramatic (and meta-dramatic) oddities of the staging were offset, to some extent, by strong performances from the principals and a number of equally distinguished supporting turns. Sondra Radvanovsky's Liza gathered in strength and conviction as the evening progressed: her first solo appearance in Scene 2 started humbly but built to a climax of considerable power, and her meeting with Hermann at the end of Scene 4 summoned an even greater intensity of conflicted feeling. But it was her ability to navigate the extraordinary gamut of emotions in the sixth scene that provided the evening with its finest moment: her initial dejection, rendered with captivating softness of tone, gave way to momentary elation, only to be eclipsed by an all-consuming despair.

Throughout the evening Ms Radvanovsky was also able to summon the best from the orchestra, and her scenes were often accompanied by playing of the highest involvement.

The role of Hermann is the opera's most demanding and Martin Muehle had both the power and stamina to ensure that his tempestuous opening scenes and his final onset of insanity at the gambling table were presented with equal intensity. If his solo passages were frequently engaging, it was the drama and passion of the various duets – with Liza or the Countess – that seemed to inspire his finest, most expressive delivery; in his attempts to wrest the secret from the Countess and, especially, in his enthusiastic rejection of Liza in favour of the casino there was exactly the right edge of barely-suppressed madness.



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In terms of raw charisma there was no one who could rival Doris Soffel, whose Countess emerged as unnervingly enigmatic. If the Countess came across as imperious and aloof in the first scene, slightly batty in the second, and deeply haunted in the fourth, Ms Soffel, through her total immersion in the role, was able to reconcile these various facets into a credible whole. There was a slightly acidic quality to her lowest passages that suited the character, and her French song in the fourth scene, performed with the druggy, faintly suggestive delivery of a cabaret singer, captured the spectral essence of a figure who didn't entirely belong to the reality of the surrounding story.

The supporting roles were also well performed: as Tomsy, Lucio Gallo delivered a stirring narration of the Countess' adventures in Paris and the legend of the three cards; and Thomas Lehman, as Yeletsky, delivered such a warmly heartfelt declaration of love to Liza

in the third scene that he established the Prince as the opera's most sympathetic character and, in the process, made Liza's choice of Hermann seem even more unfathomable. The choir were also on fine form throughout the evening, nowhere more so than in the almost liturgical lament for unaccompanied male voices near the end of the final scene.

Sebastian Weigle's consistent, often unobtrusive musical direction alternated long passages of musical narrative with sudden flourishes of inspiration. Although he had an undoubted feel for the scenes of stormy drama that punctuate the work, his secret weapon was an equal facility with the lightness in the work's less-serious moments (especially the opening promenade and the masked ball); and if he was able to heighten the mood of certain scenes through subtle accentuation – the duet of Liza and Hermann in the second scene would not have been as convincing without the insistent lilt of the orchestra – he also knew when to hold back and let the singers take the lead. If the evening's vocal and orchestral forces revealed occasional moments of sentimentality in the score, such moments were far outnumbered by passages of emotional candour and grandly wrought beauty.