

A Hidden Gem

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In the past several years, the Deutsche Oper Berlin and director Christof Loy have been mining the neglected margins of the early-twentieth-century operatic repertoire ... and more often than not they've managed to strike gold. Their winning streak was recently extended with Respighi's *La Fiamma*, the first new production of the Deutsche Oper's 2024/25 season; but if Mr Loy's articulate staging gave the evening its sense of occasion, the central attraction turned out to be the opera itself. Under the guidance of conductor Carlo Rizzi, both orchestra and singers revealed a work that in no way deserves the neglect it has suffered during the past half-century.

Although Respighi's principal claim to immortality lies with his popular orchestral evocations of Rome, opera was a consistent presence throughout his career; but of the eight operas he composed between 1905 and his premature death in 1936 – many of which had moderate success in their day – all now reside in the rare-to-extremely-rare circle of operatic limbo. *La Fiamma*, the last opera Respighi completed in his lifetime, enjoyed considerable popularity in the years leading up to the Second World War, and even received a studio recording in the mid-1950s, but has since fallen into near-complete obscurity.



Respighi: *La Fiamma*. Christof Loy, director. Carlo Rizzi, conductor. Berlin, Deutsche Oper Berlin, septiembre de 2024.
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Loy, *La Fiamma*
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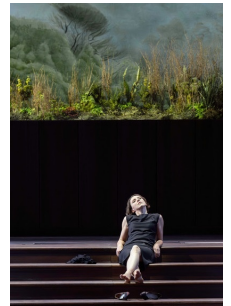
**Berlin, domingo,
29 de septiembre
de 2024.** Deutsche

Oper Berlin.

Respighi: *La*

Fiamma. Christof Loy, director. Olesya Golovneva (Silvana), Georgy Vasiliev (Donello), Ivan Inverardi (Basilio), Martina Serafin (Eudossia), and Sua Jo (Monica).

Chorus and Orchestra of the Deutsche Oper Berlin. Carlo Rizzi, conductor



Yet of all the early-twentieth-century rarities disinterred by the Deutsche Oper in recent years – the list includes Korngold's *Das Wunder der Heliane*, Schrecker's *Der Schatzgräber*, and Zandonai's *Francesca da Rimini* – *La Fiamma* demanded the fewest readjustments on the part of a twenty-first century audience. The narrative and its underlying attitudes seemed far less dated than anything in Korngold and Schrecker; and if the illicit love at the heart of the story tended more towards the melodrama of *Francesca* than the universality of *Tristan*, Respighi's level-headed treatment of the material set it apart from both the overblown passions of late verismo and the fashionable gloom of late

romanticism. In *La Fiamma*, one found a compact, clearly-recounted parable paired with a score than rarely resorted to bombast to give the drama its charge.

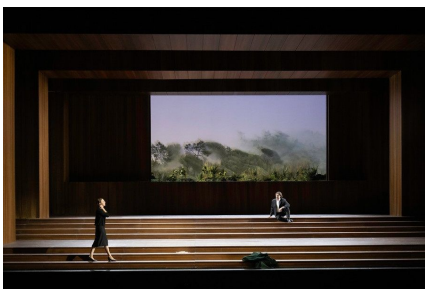
The libretto, written by Respighi's frequent collaborator Claudio Guastalla, is based on *Anne Pedersdotter*, a play about accusations of witchcraft in sixteenth-century Norway; however Respighi and Guastalla, for reasons best known to themselves, decided to set the events of the play in the Exarchate of Ravenna sometime during the seventh or eighth centuries. References to Pope Martin (removed from Rome in AD 653), the empress Irene (ruled 769–802), and the exarchate itself (conquered by Lombards in 751) suggest that Respighi and Guastalla were more interested in Byzantine spectacle than historical accuracy.

The ease with which the story fit into these disparate locales made it simple for Christof Loy to transpose it into a claustrophobic world of his own making. Indeed the setting – another valiant attempt to keep Berlin's wood-panelling industry in business – bore undeniable similarities to Mr Loy's recent *Francesca da Rimini*: in both operas, the action unfolded in an elegant but oppressively self-contained environment in which a rigid social order seemed to exist solely to crush the soul of the protagonist; and, as in many of Mr Loy's other stagings, the antiseptic beauty of the setting was rendered sinister by the near-constant presence of silent observers.



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While one could never accuse Mr Loy of being diffuse in his treatment of character or unfocussed in his approach to drama, the scenario of *La Fiamma* seems to have pushed him to even greater levels of narrative clarity. The opera's three acts, a concentrated mixture of intimate encounters and stage-filling spectacle were rendered with such economy that the unfolding of the action seemed both natural and inevitable. And by downplaying the witchcraft angle – as well as freeing the story from its Norwegian and/or Byzantine trappings – Mr Loy was able to shift the opera from a standard tale of unjust persecution to a more universal tragedy of a character whose attempts at self-realisation are destroyed by repressive surroundings.



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If the staging was made compelling through its highly focussed handling of the characters, the singers and orchestra were equally committed to revealing the depths and intricacies of the score. At the centre of the evening was Olesya Golovneva, who was able to capture the complexities of Silvana's character without seeming opaque. Her first monologue, an impassioned rail against the condition of her life, was shaded with enough ambiguity to stop it from settling into obviousness. It was in the second act, however, that she established herself as the opera's dominant force: an excellent scene in which she chastised Monica for her attraction to Donello was followed by an even greater scene with Basilio

the Exarch, a majestic out-pouring of back-story in which Silvana learns of the (unconfirmed) witchcraft in her family past; but by treating the witchcraft as a previously-undiscovered inner strength, Ms Golovneva was able to turn the second act's climactic solo scene into a thrilling moment of self-realisation.

Apart from two notable solo-scenes, many of Silvana's best scenes took the form of dialogues and duets; and two of the evening's finest scenes were those in which she was paired with Ivan Inverardi's Basilio. In the second act, Mr Inverardi's stormy first appearance turned lyrical and tender with the arrival of Silvana; but it was the subsequent tale of his enchantment at the hands of Silvana's mother in which he offered the greatest display of his emotional range and nuanced delivery. His appearance in the third act – in which the shock of Silvana's infidelity leads to Basilio's sudden death – was equally enthralling.

Although the character of Eudossia has relatively little stage time, Martina Serafin's commanding performance established her as the fearsome centre of power within the Exarch's household. As Monica, the lady-in-waiting banished for her attraction to the Exarch's son, Sua Jo made a similarly powerful impression in her few brief appearances. And Doris Soffel brought her stage charisma and sharp dramatic phrasing to the role of Agnese di Cervia, the local crone accused of witchcraft. Georgy Vasiliev, however, seemed somewhat reserved in his interpretation of Donello; certainly the love-and-death duet that opens the third act had less emotional immediacy than any of the great encounters in the second act. And while the large onstage choir dominated the orchestra during the first act finale, elsewhere they offered an engaging take on Respighi's fanciful choral writing.

The orchestra sounded especially inspired by the challenges of an unfamiliar score, and the affectionate advocacy in Carlo Rizzi's musical direction was apparent in every scene. The animated opening bars suggested that Respighi could have made a good living writing rousing film scores had he lived long enough to flee the second world war; but as the opera progressed, the music gathered in both depth and textural density. The concentrated groupings of low strings and brass – perfectly realised by the orchestra – gave an ominous solemnity to the courtly scenes of the first act, while reining in the potential chaos of that act's climactic witch hunt. But if Mr Rizzi's reading kept us attuned to the fascinations of the score, it was his disciplined pacing that gave shape to the performance. In the second and third acts especially, his ability to build scenes patiently yielded moments of climactic grandeur that sounded neither forced nor excessively sensational. The result was an evening in which the thrills of the music and the drama were held consistently in a near-perfect balance.