



Wonderful summary: Majeski, Graham and Bliss in *Capriccio* at Santa Fe

Hoheisel, were modern, but with stylistic flourishes suggesting an earlier age.

Albery's triumph was to replicate the illusion of utterly natural conversation between the volatile, intensely intellectual characters, and to allow each character to defend, often rhetorically, his or her vision of the power of art, in a way that both ennobled that vision and threw an ironic light on it. No character dominated, though many fought for preeminence.

In the sweet tones of Ben Bliss's lyric tenor, the composer Flamand sounded like Mercury, bringing light to the Earth, while the poet Olivier, in Joshua Hopkins's firmly grounded baritone, tried to assure us that truth and joy come from words, as if from the Earth itself. As the theater director La Roche, David Govertsen completed the trio of male artists by delivering an impassioned defense of theater that was absurd in its argument but affecting in its passion, which bordered on the grotesque and the magnificent. Susan Graham was marvelously genial as the great classical actress Clairon; like Craig Verm's suavely assured Count, Graham's Clairon seemed to find salvation in the more sensual aspects of life.

As the Countess, the elegant soprano Amanda Majeski presided over the tumultuous conversation and the assaults on her emotions with an air of serenity in which supernal calm-

ness was shot through with moments of confusion, self-doubt and even fear. This cast a shadow over the generally optimistic air of the proceedings, all of which came to the fore in the final monologue, in which the ecstatic cries of the Countess presaged the tragedy of emotional breakdown as much as they did the comedy of erotic fulfillment.

Leo Hussain conducted a lucid exploration of Strauss's score, building toward an ending that was close to overwhelming in its pathos. This was a warm, ultimately heartening reading of Strauss's great paean to the vitality and variety of the human imagination.

—Simon Williams

## Lebanon, NH

**OPERA NORTH'S** City Hall-based theater, on a pretty, wooded town square, looks like it could be in *Our Town's* Grover's Corners. One feels very calm there. Yet on August 9, the company—now in its second full season under the leadership of general director Evans Haile—put on a *Tosca* as gripping and incendiary as one could wish. Conductor Filippo Ciabatti dispensed admirable sweep and tension with a reduced (but skilled) orchestra. Russell Treyz staged a taut drama, traditional in outline but with some novel touches. Tosca—handsome, petite San-

dra Lopez, an admirably responsive actress—reacted to Scarpia's praises with a range of emotions, including professional pride; Act I's chorus—and Scarpia's posse—entered effectively through the auditorium. Tosca despairingly traced the sign of the cross over both her tormentor's and her lover's corpses. The show really looked as if a major urban company were in (miniaturized) play: Paul Tate dePoo III (sets) and Jack Maisenbach (costumes) achieved elegance and contrast with a vibrant palette. John Bartenstein's lighting aided mood creation throughout, with Rome's skyline subtly coming into view as Act III progressed.

Lopez is an experienced Puccini professional, with a dark-hued lyric instrument capable of considerable emotional power. Her experience has taken its toll on the freshness of her voice at full tilt, though she managed all the climaxes sensibly. Her honest artistry proved compelling. Jeffrey Gwaltney made a tall, personable Cavaradossi but, unlike his principal colleagues, didn't seem to listen onstage, offering the kind of generalized "surtitle acting" not based on the words. Apart from "Sei tu?" and a few moments in Act III's arias, we heard little of his decent though un-latinated tenor at less than mezzo-forte. More legato would help.

Gwaltney's more than serviceable performance was rather put in the shade by Aleksey Bogdanov's superb Scarpia. The Russian-American baritone, in granitic voice, offered star quality in every way. The text was scrupulously shaped, with considerable dynamic range and a musical finesse the role rarely receives. Dark-haired and pale, Bogdanov made as sensual and sexy a Scarpia as we've seen since the heyday of Milnes and Díaz: he telegraphed, to both Tosca and his audience, his enjoyment of his own villainy. (This near-vampirish concept got unexpected backup from a live bat that dive-bombed Bogdanov in Act II.) Eric Lindsey—detailed and human as the Sacristan without undue fussiness—unfurled a fat, resonant bass evoking Ezio Flagello. William Meinert (Jailer) also showed an evenly produced, promising bass.



Act II of Opera North's *Tosca*, with Bogdanov and Lopez

The following night's *Fille du Régiment* conformed more typically to expectations of a small summer company: attractive, talented young singers gave Donizetti's comedy a broad, sitcom-ish reading that was deficient

in actual style. The crowd seemed happy throughout, but my pleasure in the performance largely ended with artistic director Louis Burkot's well-led overture. (Granted, the fail-safe "Il faut partir" made its wonted effect.) Stage

director Evan Pappas generally took a fairly low road; he and soprano Lindsay Ohse (alternating Marie with Martha Eason) seem to have taken Natalie Dessay and Laurent Pelly's view of the vivandière very much to heart. Ohse's boisterous, mugging hoyden and Alex Soare's mushy-toned Sulpice "acted funny," a sure preventive for character-based humor and genuine charm. Ohse has vocal power and tended to sock out high notes; bel canto lines often turned bumptious. Andrew Surrena (sharing Tonio with Martin Clark) fielded a more relaxed characterization and sang with pleasant sound and good line except when in overdrive for the role's famed high Cs—which he reached, though not without effort.

No one sang good French; it would have been better to stick to English, which was used for the dialogue. Heather Gallagher's Marquise fielded the best speaking voice; Trevor Neal (Corporal) disclosed a rich bass. Maureen Brennan, Broadway's sexy



Lindsay Ohse  
as Donizetti's  
Marie

1974 Cunegonde, was Opera North's Krakenthorp, interpolating as salacious a rendition of Stephen Sondheim's "I never do anything twice" as can be imagined. Still boasting voice and energy, Brennan won an ovation, although it would be hard to think of a number less appropriate for the

crustily disapproving Duchesse at that moment. *Fille* justly won some laughs and cheers, but Opera North's *Tosca* was a really impressive achievement.

—David Shengold

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## INTERNATIONAL

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### *Parsifal*

#### *Bayreuth*

**BAYREUTH AT ITS BEST** offers an unforgettable experience—as was the case on August 2, the second night of this season's only new production, *Parsifal*. But Bayreuth would not be Bayreuth without the usual turbulence and scandal surrounding the production's history. In 2012, the festival announced that Jonathan Meese, a highly controversial German performance artist, would make his Bayreuth debut with the new *Parsifal* for 2016. In November 2014, the Festival fired

Meese for reasons that are still not entirely clear, choosing to assign the opera to the experienced if unspectacular Uwe Eric Laufenberg, the newly appointed intendant of the Hessian State Theater in Wiesbaden.

Then, on June 30, conductor Andris Nelsons, who has appeared regularly at the Festival since 2010, packed up and went home at short notice during *Parsifal* music rehearsals; a statement released by Nelsons's management said, in part, "Owing to a differing approach in various matters, the atmosphere at this year's Bayreuth Festival did not develop in a mutually comfortable way for all parties." The fact that *Parsifal* specialist Hartmut Haenchen was free and willing to take over the show in time for the July 25 opening proved to be a coup beyond all expectations. Haenchen, Laufenberg and an extraordinary cast catapulted Bayreuth to Olympus-like heights.

Laufenberg and his designers, Gisbert Jäkel (sets) and Jessica Karge