

isn't always a good idea to aim for realism in the opera house – often dangerous to do so in fact. But on this occasion Miss Trevelyan Oman had done her research very fully and offered us a valuable visual lesson in mid-19th century Viennese social history. In a fascinating note she explained that she had decided that the Viennese hotel in which *Arabella* opens is the centrally placed Hotel Munsch, near the Neuer Markt, with a casino on its ground floor to provide for Count Waldner's obsessive gambling, and her research had likewise elicited that the 2nd act 'Fiaker' ball would have been held in the Sperl ballroom which was fashionable at that time.

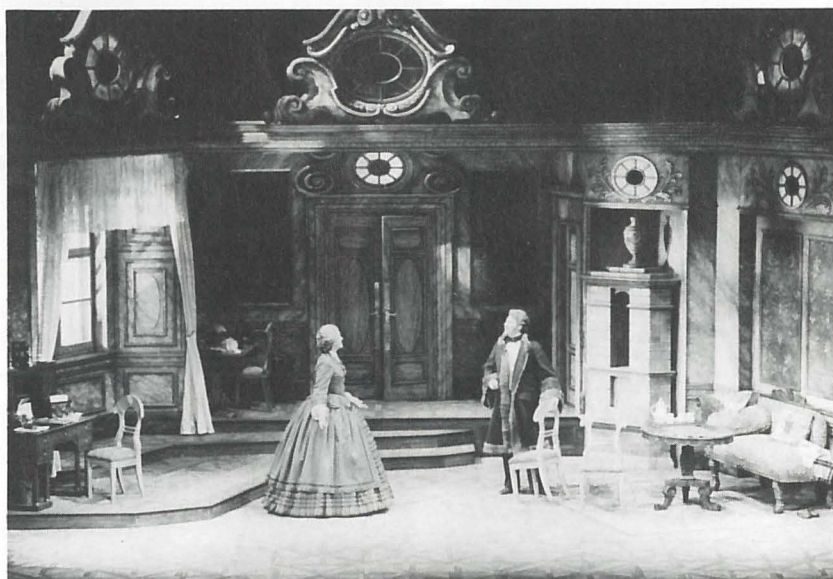
Using contemporary paintings and prints of both hotel and ballroom, which she found in Vienna, Miss Trevelyan Oman presented three strikingly vivid and realistic sets. The Waldners' hotel apartment with rather shabby "Biedermeier detail on earlier 18th century decoration" was precisely right for an aristocratic customer, down on his luck, being done a favour by a hotel which had likewise seen better times and needed his patronage. Likewise the ballroom, with its fine rococo staircase and dancefloor tucked away beneath it, right upstage, and with its gas globes and very bourgeoisie decor was precisely right for the ball in question. The final act, back at the hotel, used the staircase again as the centre of a bustling and credible hotel foyer, complete with café section, stage left, with newspapers on mahogany frames hanging from the wall after customers had finished reading them. Every detail, as this one, throughout the opera, seemed totally accurate: the furniture, carpets and curtains, ornaments, bottles and glasses (those very Austrian ones with large bowls and chunky green stems), and of course the costumes too were impeccably

judged and equally good to look at. Robert Bryan's lighting was on a similar level – one truly had the impression of looking at gas-lit rooms, and I have seldom sat in a theatre and been so utterly convinced of the truth of what was taking place on stage. This was a triumph of documentary design.

Unfortunately the Royal Opera's final new production of the season at Covent Garden of Verdi's *Aida* was not a triumph of any kind, and certainly not of design. Indeed it surprises me that Jean-Pierre Ponnelle's truly wretched set designs were ever permitted by the management to get beyond the drawing-board or model, or that that same management should have ever permitted a director to do his own lighting when he was so manifestly ill-equipped to do so. The hideous papier mâché head of, presumably, Phthah, the succession of scruffy daguerrotype gauzes, and the trumpet concerto followed by gymnastic exhibition given by knicker-clad youngsters in front of one of them that constituted the

Triumphal Scene, might have been laughable had top-price seats not been costing almost £50, and had not Nicolas Georgiadis' perfectly serviceable sets for the previous production not still been extant. Why a new production of *Aida* anyway when new stagings of Verdi's *Othello*, *Rigoletto*, *La Traviata*, and *Il Trovatore* are all far more urgently needed? It is also a sad commentary on the state of design at Covent Garden that the coming season offers new productions of Wagner's *Tannhauser* and Richard Strauss's *Ariadne auf Naxos*, both produced there in the past decade in stagings so awful as to have been incapable of revival. We need better housekeeping than that in these harsh economic times, and perhaps Covent Garden could do with a design committee to reduce the risk of this kind of wastage.

It was a blessed relief after *Aida* to visit Sadler's Wells Theatre and see New Sadler's Wells Opera's latest Gilbert and Sullivan production, designed by Tim



*Richard Strauss's Arabella produced by John Cox designed by Julia Trevelyan Oman. Every detail was researched and seemed totally accurate.*



*Amor, the God of Love looks down as Poppea rejects Ottone.*



*Arabella Act II. Robert Bryans lighting really gives the impression of looking into gaslit rooms. Photograph Guy Gravett.*