



GUY GRAVETT

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directional sense, it was hard at times to tell who was actually singing, and the orchestral sound was like listening to an old mono LP. If this large-scale format of operatic presentation is to continue, then something must be done about the sound.

Nevertheless, this was a triumph of theatrical design that left me eager, rather than my surprise, to see further ventures in the genre.

Certainly *Carmen* looked altogether more convincing on stage at Earls Court than did the new production of Verdi's *Il Trovatore* at the Royal Opera House, Covent Garden this past June. Italian Piero Faggioni is responsible here for production, design, and lighting, and it has been indicated that this is the first of four Verdi operas with a Spanish setting that he will stage at the house, of which *Ernani* and *La Forza del Destino* are to share the basic setting of *Il Trovatore*. If second and better thoughts do not prevail, I'm afraid we are in for a gloomy Verdi series over the coming seasons, for Faggioni's single, unified setting, based on a primitive mountain cave of volcanic origin on the slopes of Mount Etna in Sicily, constructed in black fibreglass, is dim, awkward, and ineffective. It abounds in deep steps, precipitate ramps, and obstructive rocks, serving, with much implausibility, for interior as well as exterior scenes. It is not

helped by Faggioni's highly arbitrary lighting. The inappropriateness and impracticality of the design is compounded by the stand-and-deliver style of production which has singers addressing the audience rather than each other. Altogether a sorry affair and a distinct step backwards from the 25-year-old magnificent Visconti/Sanjus staging of *Il Trovatore* which it has replaced.

They do things better down at Glyndebourne where the standards of direction and design during the summer festival are consistently high. This year's opening production of *Jenufa*, which opened in May, is no exception. Indeed it would be hard to imagine a staging of Janacek's opera that has more atmosphere and dramatic energy than this one, directed by Nikolaus Lehnhoff, designed by Tobias Hoheisel, and lit by Wolfgang Goppel, the team responsible for the almost equally fine production of Janacek's *Kat'a Kabanova* at Glyndebourne last year. Their basic style continues to be expressionist, with primary colours and strong perspectives. The opening act of *Jenufa* has the crucial mill-wheel slowly rotating stage left, a pair of deep red barn doors stage right, a cyclorama in between — all simply and strongly drawn. The interiors of the following acts, with their strong perspectives, particularly the church hall for the

wedding party with spring sunlight pouring in through its row of windows, are no less powerful. Hoheisel's meticulously accurate costumes and Goppel's stylised lighting, vividly denoting changes of mood and circumstance, created operatic stage design at the highest level.

At the New York Metropolitan Opera, design of a similarly high standard could be enjoyed during Wagner's *Ring* cycle. But the excitement of this *Ring*, which was presented throughout the 88 - 89 season, lay not in any directional or design concept by Otto Schenk and Gunther Schneider-Siemssen, but in the fact that instead of setting it in modern dress, in a factory, or an autobahn, they presented Wagner's great work as originally written, honouring his stage directions to the letter. This naturalist *Ring* was thus a constant joy to look at and was thrillingly achieved on the Met's comprehensively equipped stage, with immaculate lighting by Gil Wechsler. Many of the stage pictures bore an uncanny resemblance to the set models and drawings you see in the Wagner Museum in Wahnfried at Bayreuth, as well as frequently reminding you of the fine series of drawings that Arthur Rackham made for *The Ring*.

Moving from the sublime to the not-quite-ridiculous, it is good to be able to report that for once the pre-first night