

Ending it With a Blast

Julian Sachs (May 01, 2010)



The final weeks of the 2009-2010 season, with new productions and repertoire, Muti's final concerts with the New York Philharmonic and Pollini's all-Chopin recitals.

What could be better than a rarely performed opera by a great composer, sung by a great cast supported by a terrific chorus and orchestra, in a gorgeous production? All of these things make up the new production of Rossini's *Armida* at the [Metropolitan Opera](#) [2]. Based on episodes from Torquato Tasso's *Gerusalemme Liberata*, this “dramma per musica” had never been performed before at the Met, also because it requires six Rossinian tenors and a great soprano who can hold the stage for three hours in the title role - the only female voice in the entire opera.

It was opera superstar [Renée Fleming](#) [3] who sang *Armida*, a specialty in her repertoire, supported by



[Lawrence Brownlee](#) [4] as her lover Rinaldo, with Riccardo Frizza conducting. The production was by the often criticized director Mary Zimmerman, the mind behind the company's latest versions of Lucia di Lamermoor and the faulty La Sonnambula. But this time she nailed it, giving this magical history a personal touch without either overdoing it or upsetting the work. Of course her somewhat light-hearted approach, which at times tends to border on the farcical, might not be appreciated by those expecting something solemn out of this story of honor, love, loss and deception.

April 2010 also marked the final performances of Zeffirelli's production of La Traviata, which will be replaced next season by a new production by Willy Decker. [Angela Gheorghiu](#) [5] starred as Violetta, while Alfredo was sung by [James Valenti](#) [6] for his Met debut. [Thomas Hampson](#) [7] sang the baritone role of Alfredo's father, Giorgio Germont. As in most Zeffirelli productions, everything is beautiful but overdone.

For its season closer, the [Dicapo Opera Theatre](#) [8] staged the 1904 Brescia version of Puccini's Madama Butterfly, or - as stated in their program - "as Puccini originally intended it." General Director Michael Capasso was the stage director and John Farrell designed the elegant sets. In 2003-2004, the 100th anniversary year of the opera's premiere, Mr. Capasso had directed all three versions of the opera in one weekend: the La Scala version on Friday, the Brescia version on Saturday, and the standard one on Sunday. This time, though, he concentrated on the Brescia version, and the performance went very well, thanks to brilliant singing by [Mihoko Kinoshita](#) [9] in the title role and good quality from the little company's orchestra led competently by conductor Pacien Mazzagatti.

April also marked performances by two of Italy's most exported classical stars, [Riccardo Muti](#) [10], for his

final concerts with the [New York Philharmonic](#) [11], and pianist Maurizio Pollini, tackling just about everything that Chopin wrote for piano solo in three huge concerts at [Carnegie Hall](#) [12]. Muti, who will be taking up the position of Music Director of the [Chicago Symphony Orchestra](#) [13] next fall, will sadly not be seen conducting other orchestras such as the Philharmonic for a while, although it is very exciting to know that in exactly a year, he will be coming to New York with the CSO for three consecutive nights of concerts at Carnegie Hall, performing Verdi's Otello, Berlioz's Symphonie fantastique and Lelio (with Gerard Depardieu as the narrator), and an evening of music by Anna Clyne, Varèse and Shostakovich.

For his final concert with the Philharmonic he led a reduced orchestra in a program consisting of Mozart's Symphony No. 34 in C major, Boccherini's Cello Concerto in D major featuring the orchestra's principal cello, Carter Brey, and Schubert's early Symphony No. 4 in C minor, known as the Tragic. It would be interesting to understand what it was that prompted the nineteen-year-old composer to label this symphony that way, since the music doesn't really convey "tragedy." But it was 1816, after all, and harmony has changed its alphabet many times since to express certain feelings. The concert was a huge success, of course, and the Maestro received his usual standing ovations from the public at Avery Fisher Hall. He will be sorely missed next season.

Pollini came to town to do what he does best: play Chopin. The Polish-born composer, who died at

age 39 in 1849, was not only an outstanding piano virtuoso, but invented a whole new approach to the instrument, revolutionizing the basic concepts of rhythm and fingering. Everyone, during his time, was in awe of his skills, and interpreting his works is always a difficult task. Pollini makes it seem easy, delivering three gigantic performances (the third will be on May 9), holding the stage for over two hours, and making it impossible for the public even to breathe or to lose concentration for a single moment.

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During the final two weeks of the Met's 2009-2010 season it will still be possible to catch two of the year's most important new productions, Armida and Tosca. The latter will star Daniela Dessì in the title role and Sicilian tenor [Marcello Giordani](#) [14] as Tosca's lover Cavaradossi, in the much



discussed Luc Bondy season opener production.

[Daniela Dessì](#) [15] will also be joining her husband, tenor [Fabio Armiliato](#) [16], and opera expert [Fred Plotkin](#) [17] in conversation for this season's last Adventures in Italian Opera appointment at Casa Italiana Zerilli-Marimò on May 11. Although Mr. Armiliato will not be performing live in New York this month, it will be possible to see both singers tackle the leading roles of Bellini's Norma in a 2008 production from the Teatro Comunale in Bologna, conducted by Evelino Pidò, which will be broadcast in High Definition at Symphony Space's Peter Jay Sharp Theater on May 30.

Two other interesting screenings at the Sharp are La Scala's production of Donizetti's farce *Le convenienze ed inconvenienze teatrali*, starring Jessica Pratt, on May 9, and a 2008 film version of Puccini's *La Bohème*, directed by Robert Dornhelm and starring [Rolando Villazón](#) [18] as Rodolfo and [Anna Netrebko](#) [19] as Mimì, a role she sang at the Met this year.

The Bronx Opera Company, founded in 1967, produces two operas every year, one well known and one rarely performed. On May 7 and 8, at the Lovinger Theatre of Lehman College, and on May 14 and 15 at the John Cranford Adams Playhouse of Hofstra University, it will perform Donizetti's *Don Pasquale*, with a full chorus and orchestra, and sung in English.

For early music fans, on May 3 at Zankel Hall, don't miss the Venice Baroque Orchestra, featuring

virtuoso violinist Giuliano Carmignola, in a program of mostly Vivaldi, with concerti by fellow Venetians Albinoni and Tartini and Tuscan composer Geminiani. The ensemble, founded in 1997 by harpsichordist Andrea Marcon, is recognized as one of Europe's premier ensembles devoted to period-instrument performance.

Last but not least, as mentioned above, pianist Maurizio Pollini will be leaving New York after performing his third and last all-Chopin recital at Carnegie Hall on May 9. The program will center on Chopin's late compositions, written during the last years of his life, while his physical condition worsened. Among other works, Pollini's program will include the Nocturnes Op. 55 and Op. 62, the Polonaise-fantaisie in A-flat Major, Op. 61 and the Barcarolle in F-sharp Major, Op. 60. Exactly two hundred years after Chopin's birth, his music never grows old, and there is no better way to explore its poetry than to entrust it to the veteran hands of this outstanding musician.

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