

Valešová. As Rusalka, Olesya Golovneva gave a breathtaking performance. She was determined yet fragile in her impossible pursuit and her agony reached the back row with the same intent as the frustration. Her Prince, David Butt Philip, was making his debut in a role that had been cancelled last spring at ENO due to Covid-19. His complex range of feelings emerged in a well-placed voice of subtle beauty. As the other set of lovers, Asmik Grigorian and Eric Cutler made an electrifying couple, their passion barely controlled. The soprano was riveting throughout, while the ardent tenor portrayed vividly a fickle Prince. There was physical prowess on stage as well: an unexpected operation meant that Cutler was on crutches, and both sopranos danced *en pointe*, a skill that must have taken months of preparation. Andreas Bauer Kanabas was a richly sonorous Vodník who was protective, frustrated and disappointed, whereas Maxim Kuzmin-Karavaev's elegant water goblin was reserved, dejected and embittered. As Ježibaba the witch, a penetrating Okka von der Damerau delivered punctuated diction and emphasized the maternal side; Katarina Dalayman created a more temperamental figure. Rebecca von Lipinski's excessive vibrato marred her seductive Foreign Princess, whereas Karita Mattila commanded the stage with savage beauty. Sebastià Peris (Hunter) had a supple voice; Manel Esteve (Forester) and Juliette Mars (Kitchen Boy) were wonderfully agile comic relief; and the sprightly mezzo Rachel Kelly (Second Nymph) showed vocal character along with Julietta Aleksanyan and Alyona Abramova to complete the balanced trio.

With Rusalka's dream of 'the bright sunshine' shattered, she slowly disappeared in a stunning finale where, for the only time, there was a mellow hue of gentle light. After nearly a century, *Rusalka* had finally returned to this Madrid stage. VICTORIA STAPELLS

SWEDEN

Stockholm

Kaija Saariaho owes her belated debut at the ROYAL SWEDISH OPERA to the social distancing guidelines for musical venues and to the organization Jewish Culture in Sweden, which sponsored this performance of her 2006 oratorio *La Passion de Simone*. The fact that it is written for solo soprano, mixed chorus and chamber ensemble, and requires no staging, makes this a good fit in uncertain times. On top of that, this 'Musical Journey in 15 Stations' is surprisingly graceful and easy on the ear, despite the grave and brooding character of the libretto. The true challenge for the listener is being able to come to grips with the serious subject matter: a meditation on the life and writings of the Franco-Jewish social and political philosopher Simone Weil (1909-43). Weil was a contradictory and at times divisive person, which the text and music reflects perfectly.

When Saariaho left Finland to study abroad the only book she packed in her suitcase was Weil's posthumously published *Gravity and Grace* (1947). Saariaho admits that back then she didn't necessarily understand the spiritual guidance that is offered in the notebooks, but she became inspired by Weil's strong desire for truth and the meaning of human existence. Eventually Saariaho learnt to speak French and decided to devote a year to studying Weil's works. Saariaho dedicated *La Passion de Simone* to her two children, and still feels that it is very close to her heart. In 15 movements, reflecting the

stations of the cross, the oratorio essentially presents a biography of Weil. The similarities with the Bach Passions and references to the Via Dolorosa are quite superficial. In the end Jesus's redemptive death is evoked, the difference being that Weil's last station offers absolutely no redemption.

The original version of *La Passion de Simone*, staged by Peter Sellars, was scored for a large-scale orchestra and chorus. In Stockholm the pared-down

forces of the Royal Swedish Opera Orchestra played the chamber version of the oratorio in a concert performance that felt a little bit too static. Anne Sofie von Otter immersed herself totally in the role of narrator, critic and 'sister'. Much of the time the vocal line follows the natural French speech pattern, which makes it easier to sing and understand the words. Von Otter's voice sounded fluid and slightly veiled in a very seductive manner. Her commitment was heartfelt and her manner both reproachful and forgiving.

Saariaho sat behind the mixing desk and made sure that Weil's pre-recorded aphorisms, spoken in a whisper by Dominique Blanc, slid in smoothly. The chorus, echoing the soloist's laments, sounded subdued, not helped by their spread-out positioning. The colourful layering, deliberate disjointedness, frequent glissandos, sudden vortices of sound, aural fragmentation, hovering string tensions, ominous brass and mellow marimba figures, were all subtly balanced and handled by the well-rehearsed orchestra conducted by Christian Karlsen. The highlight of the evening came in the seventh station with the consoling oboe solo followed by a duet with the statuesque von Otter despairing of Weil's self-destructive asceticism.

This was a one-off performance (October 17) in front of a 'new normal' capacity audience of 50 people, but the Royal Swedish Opera hopes to repeat this production in the near future.

ALBERT EHRNROOTH



Anne Sofie von Otter in Saariaho's 'La Passion de Simone' in Stockholm

United States

New York

In these curious times, opera companies big and small have sought to keep themselves in the public eye online—sometimes doggedly, more laudably with imagination and flair. The five-year-old CITY LYRIC OPERA, 'female founded and led', has heretofore been one of the lesser small companies in New York, but it made something of a splash this autumn with its 'live virtual' production of *The Threepenny Opera*, seen online in two roughly hour-long parts on November 7 and 8.

'Live virtual' meant that purchasers of the more expensive tickets (\$24 vs \$12) could participate from home in the production as extras. As a humble freeloading critic,