

Stellar Cast Propels *Maria Stuarda* at the Theater an der Wien

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Donizetti's *Maria Stuarda* was once as rare as the flat-footed platypus. Today it is a repertory piece. Any singer worth her salt should love to chew the scenery in the various confrontations in Acts I and II, ending with the famous confrontation between Elizabeth I and Maria, echoing with words which were too much for nineteenth century censors and were banned: "profanato il soglio inglese, vil bastarda, dal tuo piè!" ("the English throne has been profaned, vile bastard, by your foot!") It is too much for the "figlia impura di Bolena" ("Boleyn's impure daughter") as Maria also calls her, and Elizabeth orders Maria taken away by the guards, eventually signing her death warrant.

Vienna's Theater an der Wien is currently running a series of performances of this "Tudor" opera with Alexandra Deshorties as Elizabeth and Marlis Petersen as the hapless Queen of the Scots. Norman Reinhardt played the dulcet voiced Roberto, Count of Leicester, who wants to plead Mary's case with Elizabeth—who has her own feelings for him—and Stefan Cerny was a fine bass Talbot. Tobias Greenhaigh and Natalia Kawalek played the minor roles of Cecil and Anna. The production was by the controversial Christof Loy.



Marlis Petersen as Maria

Loy staged the opera on a bare, oval-shaped stage with a blond, wooden wall encircling the oval. Two long rows of black bench seats encircling the oval give spare relief to the light wood. There was no scenery and there were no props. The oval playing surface was sharply raked, and it revolved very slowly so that the high point of the rake was sometimes at the back of the stage, sometimes on the sides and twice faced the audience, making the singers

appear high above those sitting in the orchestra level (stalls). This feature, along with effective lighting by Bernd Purkrabek and careful choreographic movement, gave variety and a sense of changing scenes even though there were no sets to change.



Elizabeth (Alexandra Deshorties) on the Oval

In the first part (Acts I and II were played together), Loy dressed the characters in minimalist Elizabethan costumes, all in black and grays except for the queens. Elizabeth wore a colorful, extremely wide period court gown, while Maria wore a simpler blue gown. Elizabeth had bright red hair as her portraits show; Maria had a brunette coif. Towards the end of the first part (end of Act II), after Maria flings her insults at Elizabeth, the latter called her guards, who rushed in dressed in contemporary black suits. It was the signal that change was coming in the second part, when everyone was in contemporary dress: Elizabeth (now a blonde with a pony tail) was in an elegant black pants suit and high heels that reminded me of Theresa May, while Maria was also dressed in black—a sweater top and pants. For the final scene, she changed into a simple black shift. I am not sure what the point of this was, except that today's major opera directors seem almost never to leave a work in the period to which it was assigned by the librettist and the composer (or history). If the point was to suggest that the antipathy between the two queens was no different than that between normal, contemporary folks like those of us in the audience, well, yawn.

Aristotle wrote about the difference between royals who suffer tragic falls and normal people more than two millennia ago. Mary, Queen of Scots and Elizabeth I are not the Real Housewives of New Jersey. Besides, the opera *Maria Stuarda* is historically based. Of course that history is filtered through early nineteenth century sensibility, but Donizetti and Giuseppe Bardari, his librettist, had the good sense to leave Elizabethan queens as queens, and so did Schiller, their source. The change of era did not greatly harm the proceedings, but it left me wondering 'why do it?'

An unusual (and positive) aspect to Loy's production was to make everyone young, and not just the two queens, who seemed to be in their early thirties. All of the courtiers (and this included several extras as well as members of the chorus) seemed to be twenty-something interns in Elizabeth's court, which made Elizabeth's jealous rage quite believable. (In addition, Loy added a mute role of the "Queen's Familiar" (Georgij Puchalski) for no apparent reason.) In the first part he directed that there be constant activity and movement: the courtiers (and the principals) paced the stage and constantly interacted like caged animals giving a sense of barely contained tension. I liked it at first; it seemed a good way to avoid stasis in bel canto operas, but eventually it was too much and began to seem affected and self-conscious, especially when the courtiers swarmed around Mary like a hive of bees and pawed at her dress (and at her) while she sang "Nella pace del mesto riposo," the cabaletta to her Act II aria. In the second part, by contrast, there was calm, a deathly calm, among the chorus members and extras, and the principals were allowed to take center stage unhindered by superfluous action. Loy's acting direction of individuals was brilliant in every way in expressing the emotions which tore them apart. If anything, it seemed too studied at times.



Deshorties and Petersen: Angry Queens

Fortunately, he had some remarkable singing actresses to work with. Marlis Petersen has sung all sorts of roles including Susanna, Violetta, *The Merry Widow* and contemporary works. I recall her recently as a riveting Lulu in Berg's opera at the Met. It is a long way from Berg to Donizetti, technique-wise, but Petersen was just as splendid in acting the doomed queen as she was as Berg's prostitute. Her bel canto technique is solid, although careful; she has recently sung other bel canto roles including Alaide in Bellini's *La straniera*. Alexandra Deshorties has also sung a wide number of roles, but with an emphasis recently on bel canto including Norma, Rossini's Elisabetta and the Donizetti Elisabetta in *Roberto Devereux*. Elisabetta in this opera is not a nice person, and Deshorties (under Loy's direction) was animalistic in her hate as well as her barely suppressed passion for Leicester. Norman Reinhardt improved as the performance progressed, and floated lovely pianissimos. Among the others, Cerny's Talbot was particularly good.

It appeared to me that Loy tried to suppress the religious aspect of the drama as much as possible to focus on the personal nature of the confrontation of the queens, which is hard to do given that Talbot is secretly a Catholic priest, that Maria confesses to him and that the taxing end of the opera has its high point in the great prayer “Deh! Tu di un’umile preghiera il suono.” Also considering that historically much of the reason for the conflict between Catholic Mary and Protestant Elizabeth had to do with religion.



Elizabeth as Executioner

On the whole, I would say that I had minor problems with Loy’s concept, but not with his direction of the characters, or with the very strong singing. Credit Paolo Arrivabene too, for his powerful, vigorous conducting of the ORF Radio-Symphonie Orchestra, Wien, and the superb Arnold Schoenberg Chorus, led by Erwin Ortner. Arrivabene brought out aspects in this music that I had never heard before. It was fresh and compelling, as was whole performance. The packed house applauded vociferously.