

Peter Gelb's Met

This season at the Metropolitan Opera is the first to totally reflect the bold aesthetic of this general manager.

By Martin Bernheimer



[Peter Gelb at the Metropolitan Opera]

For better or worse, Peter Gelb is remaking the image of the Metropolitan Opera. His Metropolitan Opera.

The ambitious and resourceful general manager took over the company from Joseph Volpe back in 2006. But the current season is the first to really reflect his aesthetic intentions, the first in which he was able to plan every detail himself.

Like all arts institutions, the Met faces grave financial problems these days. Gelb is trying to evade the inherent slings and arrows by marketing opera beyond its normal constituency. He wants to keep his essential core audience, which is graying inexorably. At the same time he wants to court a younger, possibly less sophisticated public. The balancing act is tricky.

In any case, Gelb is gradually abandoning the ornate yet static ultraconventional productions of the past in favor of tough and sparse stagings that engage progressive theatrical forces. He is basking in the success of an unprecedented outreach-project that beams high-definition telecasts to movie theaters here and abroad. And, in a continuing move to popularize opera in general, the Met in particular, he is transmitting opening-night performances to huge screens outside on the Lincoln Center Plaza and in Times Square. Sight in these unconventional locales must, of course, be better than sound. No matter. It's the nature of the commercial beast.

Triumph cannot be automatic. There are too many variables in this irrational art, and the Met's conservative patrons have not appreciated all of Gelb's innovations. The new version of Puccini's *Tosca* that opened the season in September took liberties with the libretto that discomforted traditionalists, and the production team was greeted with a lusty chorus of boos during curtain calls. In various interviews, Gelb remained cool. He insisted that he found the controversy healthy. Culture cannot survive, he declared, without change.

His survival theory may be tested further with a pair of new productions opening in December. Both involve beloved staples of the French repertory. Both replace popular, opulent stagings inherited from Volpe. And both have undergone drastic casting shake-ups. The best laid plans of mice, men and opera impresarios...

Offenbach's *Les Contes d'Hoffmann*, a.k.a. *The Tales of Hoffmann*, unveiled on December 3, continues in the repertory with eight additional performances scattered through January 2. Gelb has assigned this "psychological fantasy" (his description) to Bartlett Sher, a theatrical pro whose credits include *The Light in the Piazza* and *South Pacific* for Lincoln Center Theater and *Il Barbiere di Siviglia* at the Met. Working in conjunction with the set designer Michael Yeagan and the costume designer Catherine Zuber, Sher calls this

opera "a magical journey in which Hoffmann works out different manifestations of his psyche."

If all had gone as hoped, Rolando Villazón would have portrayed the agonized protagonist. Unfortunately, vocal-cord surgery has forced the Mexican matinee-idol to withdraw. In his place Gelb has engaged the promising Maltese tenor, Joseph Calleja, who is undertaking the complexities of Hoffmann for the first time. The hero's drastically dissimilar loves – a mechanical doll, a Venetian courtesan and a sacrificial diva – are often performed by the same singer, and the original plan was to feature the much vaunted Anna Netrebko in this multiple assignment. She eventually decided, however, to venture only Antonia, the tragic heroine in the Munich episode, ceding the other parts and other acts to Ekaterina Gubanova and Kathleen Kim.

Hoffmann's amorous desires are thwarted by four different, equally nasty villains. It was announced long ago that the charismatic German bass René Pape would undertake the various incarnations of evil. He succumbed to unexplained second thoughts, however, and the fine American baritone Alan Held has come to the casting rescue.

James Levine – the Met's splendid, perennially over-achieving music-director – is scheduled to conduct the new production. After suffering a herniated disc in September, he took time off for surgery and cancelled most of his autumn commitments. He intends, however, to return in time for *Hoffmann*. Optimistic fingers are crossed on both sides of the footlights.

Bizet's *Carmen*, possibly the most popular challenge in the standard repertory, comes back to the Met on Dec. 31, with 13 additional performances on

the calendar through May 1. A bleak new production by the British director Richard Eyre replaces the cast-of-thousands oh-so-literal extravaganza directed by Franco Zeffirelli in 1996. Eyre, whose imposing credits include so-called legitimate theater and film as well as opera, says *Carmen* "is about sex, violence and racism – and its corollary: freedom." At the first performances, the temperamental Romanian soprano Angela Gheorghiu was supposed to play the magnetic title character, a gypsy fatalist who lives and dies by her own standards of morality. Gheorghiu has deferred her appearance, however, until the end of the run "for personal reasons." Opera's ever-active rumor mill suggests that she chose not to share the stage with her possibly estranged husband, the tenor Roberto Alagna, who sings Don José early in the run. Instead of Gheorghiu, Alagna will now stab the steamy Latvian mezzo-soprano, Elina Garanča. Yannick Nézet-Séguin, a dashing young Canadian conductor enjoying a rapidly ascending career, makes his debut in the pit.

This won't be – can't be – just another opening, another show. ■

The Metropolitan Opera

Lincoln Center, West 62nd Street; 212-799-3100; metopera.org

Pulitzer-prize winning critic Martin Bernheimer covers music in New York for the *Financial Times* and *Opera* magazine. His last pieces for *Promenade* were on the Met's new productions of *Tosca* and *From the House of the Dead* and the NY Philharmonic's new music director, Alan Gilbert.



[Elina Garanča in the title role of the Met's production of *Carmen*]

[Joseph Calleja as Hoffmann in *Les Contes d'Hoffmann*]

