

FESTIVAL FOCUS

Donizetti Opera Festival, Bergamo

Review by James Imam • Photography by Gianfranco Rota

Angelic voices

Until a decade ago, *L'ange de Nisida*, Donizetti's mature opera, was believed lost. That was before an Italian musicologist rediscovered it, filed in numerous boxes at Paris' Bibliothèque Nationale. After being painstakingly stitched back together, the score was presented in a London concert performance in 2018. Now, Bergamo's Donizetti Opera Festival has presented *L'ange's* first ever staging.

The Teatro Donizetti, Bergamo's principal opera theatre, was chosen for the occasion. Or was it the other way round? Indeed, it was *L'ange* that had been selected to reopen the newly refurbished theatre. Alas, the project has fallen behind schedule, but artistic director Francesco Micheli stuck with the venue. Evidently prepared to take full responsibility for having scheduled a performance 'in the building site of the Teatro Donizetti', as it was ultimately billed, Micheli himself directed the production.

It seems that *L'ange* has been unlucky in its performance venues. Written in 1839, the opera was shelved after the Théâtre de la Renaissance, its commissioner, went into administration. The following year, Donizetti recycled much of the music for *La favorite*. The two operas have broadly similar plots: Leone de Casaldi, a wandering soldier, marries Countess Sylvia de Linarès only to discover she is the mistress of the dastardly Ferdinand, King of Naples. The drama culminates in Sylvia's natural death, and the journey to the climax is sustained, if not by great narrative tension, by unflagging musical interest.

With the action taking place in the gutted stalls, the audience occupied boxes



and a grandstand placed on the stage. The orchestra was positioned in the pit though the players sat back to front. That allowed conductor Jean-Luc Tingaud to keep an eye on the singers. When the chorus appeared in the lower gallery, on the other hand, audience members did not know where to look.

It was an immersive, at times delightfully disorientating performance, in which Micheli resourcefully conjured magic. The sheet music spread over a sheet on the floor – the score gestated inside the theatre's womb, apparently – felt contrived, but stark switches in lighting, culminating in the chandelier descending at the end of Act I, were more visually effective. The moment courtiers ripped off beautiful, brightly coloured paper tunics was a real *coup de théâtre*.

Tingaud conducted incisively, and there were numerous interesting voices

to discover. Florian Sempey's strapping Don Fernand effortlessly commanded the gaping performance space. Roberto Lorenzi as his haphazard servant Don Gaspar offered the dash of *buffa* spiritedness this work requires. South Korean Konu Kim (Leone) impressed with his ardent, soaring tone. The chief discovery, though, was the exceptional Russian soprano Lidia Fridman (Sylvia). Eminently secure in filigree coloratura, she

also provided a vocal depth and richness belied by her delicate figure. An utterly memorable occasion.

★★★★★

Murder most foul

The figure of Lucrezia Borgia has captured the imaginations of writers and dramatists throughout history. Little wonder, when the purported events of her life – the poisonings, the murder of her

Below left: Francesco Micheli's immersive staging of *L'ange de Nisida*

Below: Vocal depth from Lidia Fridman

Right: Carmela Remigio funnelling grief, menace and defiance as Lucrezia Borgia

