

Spain

Barcelona

After Milan and London, Daniele Abbado's staging of *Nabucco* came to another of its co-producing theatres to open the season at the GRAN TEATRE DEL LICEU (October 7). I share the disappointment expressed by my colleagues in Italy and the UK: this is an inert show, in spare designs (by Alison Chitty), that achieves some sense of drama only in 'Va, pensiero', when the chorus are crowded together under a spotlight. That was, as expected, one of the highlights of the performance thanks to the commitment of the Liceu chorus. Daniel Oren inspired the orchestra to provide from the pit the energy lacking on stage. Ambrogio Maestri was not on top form as Nabucco, Martina Serafin's Abigail lacked venom, and Roberto De Biasio was an ineffectual Ismaele, but Vitalij Kowaljow had the required nobility of line for Zaccaria, and Marianna Pizzolato was a fine Fenena.

The Editor himself said (in August 2014, p. 1005) almost everything that can be said about Terry Gilliam's hyperactive production of *Benvenuto Cellini*, which was enthusiastically received by the Barcelona audience on November 8. I can only add that I embraced less hesitantly the craziness of this spectacular staging. John Osborn was an ideal Cellini, with elegant phrasing, strong determination when needed, and a firm high register. His was a most convincing portrait of a genius with an overdeveloped ego. Kathryn Lewek was a feisty Teresa, vocally more light than lyrical. Eric Halfvarson had a whale of a time as the Pope, but Ashley Holland was a grey Fieramosca. Some prudence in Josep Pons's conducting was understandable in such a tricky score, but his firm direction rightly underlined the distinctness of Berlioz's incomparable sound-world. It was a double pity, then, that, unlike Mark Elder in Amsterdam last May, he didn't restore some of the cuts made to the piece.

XAVIER CESTER

Vigo

Benjamin Britten is not a regular in Spanish opera houses so it was exciting to see *Curlew River* in Vigo. With cutbacks forcing smaller theatres to programme the staples, the initiative of the AMIGOS DE LA ÓPERA DE VIGO was brave indeed. On October 24, the TEATRO AFUNDACIÓN filled 500 seats with an expectant and responsive audience. Britten's inspiration for the piece came on a trip to Japan where he was enthralled by Noh theatre, and the premiere was eight years later at his Aldeburgh Festival in 1964. *Curlew River* was the first of three 'Parables for Church Performance' with William Plomer as the librettist and Peter Pears in the lead role. The story tells of the search of a Madwoman for her lost son. She crosses the Curlew River and joins the prayers at what is assumed to be the grave of her small boy. From on high, the boy's spirit is heard and the woman is cured of her insanity. This staged chamber music drama is at once austere, exotic and powerful.

The tenor Carlos Pardo has directed numerous operas and zarzuelas in his career and has a particular interest in Britten. Directing this Vigo production, he emphasized Noh theatre style rather than intimate character portrayal. With bright reds and blues as backdrops to the fanciful costumes (by Ouka Leele), heavily made-up faces, and angular choreography (by Marta Gómez), the performers entered and exited in procession down the main aisle, following the style of Colin Graham's original 1964 production. Excellent in their portrayals were Lorenzo Moncloa as a heartrending,

emotive Madwoman, Marco Moncloa as a rough-edged Ferryman and John Heath as a compassionate Traveller. All three performed with commendable diction. Alfonso Baroque as the Abbot and Maria José Bejerano as the child's spirit carried their parts adequately. The Óperanova chorus and chamber orchestra, conducted by Juan Bautista Carmena, unfortunately detracted from what was, in all other aspects, a truly exceptional evening.

VICTORIA STAPELLS

United States

Dallas

Jake Heggie has become a name that quickly comes to mind in virtually any discussion of contemporary American opera. Heggie's neo-Romantic music is a lure for audiences, and his choice of literary collaborators has served him well. Perhaps most significantly, companies that produce his operas want him back.

He was back at the DALLAS OPERA on October 30, when the company that had given the premiere of his *Moby-Dick* in 2010 introduced another new work, *Great Scott*. This proved to be a crowd-pleaser and seems likely to join *Dead Man Walking* and *Moby-Dick* on the list of Heggie favourites.

There is one striking difference between *Great Scott* and the other two: they are tragedies, while *Great Scott* is a comedy. The playwright Terrence McNally, who wrote the libretto, has expressed some mild irritation at the label, but audience laughter makes it inevitable. The work is an opera-within-an-opera. A star mezzo-soprano, Arden Scott, returns to her hometown hoping to revive the fortunes of its struggling opera company by performing a long-lost but newly rediscovered bel canto masterpiece: *Rosa Dolorosa, figlia di Pompei*

■ Joyce DiDonato and Frederica von Stade in the premiere of Heggie's 'Great Scott' in Dallas

by one Vittorio Bazzetti. There are complications: rehearsals don't go well, the Super Bowl with the hometown team participating is in direct conflict with the operatic premiere, and the mezzo's old boyfriend appears, and with him the possibility of rekindling their romance.

Great Scott gives Heggie an opportunity to demonstrate a hitherto unsuspected gift: he is a talented musical mimic. For *Rosa Dolorosa* he switches into bel canto mode, writing music that, apart from some slight exaggeration, might be from the pen of a composer of the era of Rossini, Bellini and Donizetti. The first indication that there

