The premiere of Cezary Duchnowski's 'The Best City in the World' at Polish National Opera

choral writing is reminiscent of Carl Orff, though thoroughly updated. Both singers were stunning in their virtuoso performances. Sinfonia Varsovia, conducted by Bassem Akiki, was especially effective when the score almost graphically represented the process of destroying Warsaw in a kind of ominous, ambient theatre music. The work would seem almost unstageable, but the production was a triumph. Barbara Wiśniewska and her huge team (including the set designer Natalia Kitamikado and the lighting designer Aleksandr Prowaliński) created an engaging and visually powerful show, and it is a pity that its well-subsidized four-night run seems likely to be its only showing.

In Warsaw there was a lot of social-media hype around this new work. There were also complaints from the descendants of people who actually rebuilt Warsaw, as they were not invited to this official 'celebration of the successful reconstruction'. These complaints only served to suggest that *The Best City in the World* truly belongs in the history of opera, a genre that began with the presentation of mythical heroes of the past as a way of celebrating the rulers of today. ALEKSANDER LASKOWSKI

Wrocław

Wrocław's OPERA HOUSE reopened in the autumn of 1945 with Stanisław Moniuszko's opera *Halka*. To celebrate the 80th anniversary of this, OPERA WROCŁAWSKA staged

another Moniuszko work, *The Haunted Manor* (September 12). The director Bruno Berger-Gorski succeeded admirably in making this opera (premiered in Warsaw in 1865) interesting for today's audiences, weaving the somewhat awkward plot into Polish history. During the orchestral prelude, a projected map showed how Poland was divided up by the Russian Tsarina Catherine, the Habsburg Emperor Joseph II and the Prussian King Frederick II, eventually disappearing from the map altogether. Berger-Gorski even showed Catherine humiliating the last Polish king, Stanisław August Poniatowski, making him perform services under her skirt; he also brought a drunken cardinal with half-naked altar boys onto the stage—in Catholic Poland.

The staging did justice to the opera's title, with some truly spooky scenes. There were fantastic lighting effects (by Bogumił Palewicz) and a walking grandfather clock; but there was also plenty of humour. The story began in postwar Wrocław, with Daniel Dvořák's set showing a city in ruins, and the Polish soldiers scarred by the fighting. The young brothers Stefan and Zbigniew vow not to marry: there is too much to do, and a family would be a hindrance. Cześnikowa, the young men's aunt, appears, wanting to marry her nephews off, but she does not succeed. The two brothers set off to collect money from Miecznik, the owner of the Haunted Manor. There they meet Hanna and Jadwiga, the daughters of the lord of the manor, and—how could it be otherwise?—fall in love with them. Before the wedding can be celebrated, the two young men expose Damazy, their rival for the young girls' affections, to ridicule. At the end there is a joyful folk festival with the mazurka (choreographed by Bożena Klimczak) danced in the market square of the rebuilt Wrocław. Tourists and the city's current residents take photos on their phones and cheer on the dancers.

The cast was very well chosen. Piotr Buszewski made good use of his powerful tenor voice in the role of Stefan, and Paweł Horodyski shone as Zbigniew with his melodious, robust bass. The two were perfectly attuned to each other as brothers. No wonder that the two sisters, Hanna (Hanna Sosnowska-Bill, soprano) and Jadwiga (Aleksandra Opała, mezzo-soprano), happily accept the two young men's proposals at the end. Sosnowska-Bill sang Hanna's aria denouncing the men's alleged cowardice with such charm and smoothness that she earned a thunderous ovation. Barbara Bagińska as the pushy Aunt Cześnikowa, Jacek Jaskuła as Maciej, a servant reminiscent of

Bruno Berger-Gorski's new production of 'The Haunted Manor' in Wrocław

Papageno, and Paweł Żak as the bizarre Damazy in a Napoleon outfit provided some droll humour. Łukasz Motkowicz as Miecznik, the concerned father of Hanna and Jadwiga, sang his aria venting his contempt for cowardly young men very effectively. Mirian Khukhunaishvili, the new music director of Opera Wrocławska, ensured that the music was performed with commitment, precision and expressiveness. JÜRGEN GAHRE

SPAIN

Madrid

Otello opened the 2025-6 season at the TEATRO REAL (seen on September 22), with three people making the performance especially memorable: the conductor Nicola Luisotti, the soprano Asmik Grigorian, and the lighting designer Adam Silverman.

Firstly, the musical energy from the pit informed the evening. Luisotti is undoubtedly one of the great Verdi conductors of our times. Here, his sense of varied tempos, colour palette, precision and balance expressed a multitude of emotions that propelled the action to its heartbreaking finale. Secondly, there was Grigorian's captivating Desdemona, sung with exquisite phrasing and caressing depth, alternating ecstasy and anguish. The soprano's voice dropped to a mere whisper when she prayed, and the audience held its breath. Thirdly, in the return of David Alden's well-known production, shared between the Teatro Real, English National Opera and the Royal Swedish Opera, no character was above suspicion; everyone lurked or hid in the shadows. On a dark and bare stage, it was precisely the evocative lighting that filled the space, while leaving room for the magnificent music. The tenuous flickering and moving shadow of Otello's slow approach to the bedroom was Hitchcockian at its best.

Asmik Grigorian as Desdemona in Madrid

In his role debut, Brian Jagde was a powerfully projected, sincere, assured and attractive Otello. One sensed that with more experience the complexities of the role will increasingly come within his grasp. Gabriele Viviani as Iago delivered a strong 'Credo in un dio crudele' but with insufficient depths of evil intensity. VICTORIA STAPELLS