

## MUSIC

## The Met's 'La Rondine' Charms

## Gheorghiu and Alagna star in a rarely produced Puccini romance

By ROSEMARIE FRUEHAUF  
Epoch Times Staff

NEW YORK—Nobody dies and at the end the characters simply return to their previous lives—can this be a Puccini opera? It is: This story of a woman who escapes from her golden cage to search for true love doesn't need tragedy and pathos. It is in the lightness of this neglected masterpiece, "La Rondine" ("The Swallow") wherein its grace lies.

The Met's New Year's Eve production of "La Rondine" can thank its passionate singers and its summer-like stage design for helping us forget the gray winter days and overlook, yes, some similarities to "Die Fledermaus,"—like a maid who borrows her lady's gown to go to a party where guests disguise their true identities and flirt.

Thanks to Roberto Alagna and Angela Gheorghiu, "La Rondine" made a comeback on European stages in the '90s. It has been 75 years since it appeared at the Met. Fresh and romantic as can be, director Nicolas Joël sets the story in the '20s, featuring fabulous costumes by Franca Squarciapino and a gorgeous art deco setting, reminiscent of Klimt, designed by Ezio Frigerio. This staging was co-produced by Theatre du Capitole, Toulouse and the Royal Opera House, Covent Garden, London.

Moreover, this "Swallow" flies on an April breeze due to the sensi-

tive hands of conductor Marco Armiliato, who brings out the refinement and femininity of the score: Lush melodies paired with parallel chords and atmospheric ambient sounds—sweet and elegant, but never kitschy.

Puccini wrote "La Rondine" after his greatest operas had already made him world famous. It was originally commissioned as an operetta for a Viennese theater and never recovered from that association; it has rarely been taken seriously as an opera. It premiered in Monte Carlo in 1917, as World War I had made its premiere in Vienna impossible.

## The Story

Magda lives a luxurious life as the mistress of Rambaldo, a wealthy old gentleman. A glamour girl in her salon, she is adored by the ironic poet Prunier and envied by her giggling, glittery friends.

One scene is enough to characterize Rambaldo: He presents to Magda a precious pearl necklace, saying: "I wanted to give it to you before dinner, darling, but I forgot about it..." Samuel Ramey delivers a short, yet impressive entrance. That the baritone legend's voice is growing old only helps the fatherly and self-controlled part of Rambaldo.

Later that evening, Magda will change into a floating chiffon dress and go to Bullier's dance hall—searching for freedom and



LOVERS' MEETING: Roberto Alagna and Angela Gheorghiu in the lovely Puccini opera, "La Rondine." KEN HOWARD

adventure. Her innocent encounter with Ruggiero takes place amidst the noisy pub, a scene that Puccini celebrates as a revival of the Café

Momus scene from "La Bohème." With the powerful choir (kudos to choir-master Donald Palumbo), the opera reaches its melodious climax.

At the end of the romantic night, the exhilarated but bewildered Magda will leave Rambaldo to start a new life with Ruggiero. Meanwhile, a woman on the street sings a warning about the ephemeral nature of love.

The tragic misunderstanding between the lovers lies in their different understanding of life and worsens as the starry-eyed Ruggiero can't see who Magda really is. After spending some months together in a Riviera hotel, Ruggiero wants to marry Magda and dreams of an idyllic future—children included—in his family's country home. Magda doesn't dare reveal the truth about her past to him as she knows it would end their happiness.

The contradiction between their degree of awareness becomes almost unbearable when Ruggiero joyfully insists that Magda reads his mother's letter to him. In it the woman welcomes Magda as her son's virtuous and loving wife.

This classic, sentimental, Puccini scene precedes Magda's unavoidable disclosure of her past. In a poignant moment, Magda confesses to Ruggiero that she will never be what he expects and dreams her to be, as she can't deny who she has been. Sadly, with a melancholic sigh, she turns back to her old life with Rambaldo, leaving her lover heartbroken.

Gheorghiu plays Magda, the swallow, as a woman who simply longs to be herself. She is fragile, romantic, fun-loving, and outgoing—a very modern personality. Gheorghiu embodies the part, as actress and singer, with her natural charisma. A warm and alluring so-

prano, she sings to a charming light and unsophisticated effect, sometimes a bit breathy in the lower register, bringing out the girlish side of the heroine.

Alagna's Ruggiero has his best moments when he enters the stage as the introverted young man full of awe and excitement because he is seeing Paris for the first time. And again, when he meets Magda and during their love duet in Act 2, he warms the heart. Unfortunately, though, sometimes he uses pressure along a phrase and can't meet the vocal expectations. He marks the tragic outpouring at the end of the opera much like an average Puccini hero—with a lot of force and pathos. It is a bit too harsh at the end of the otherwise soft opera.

Though the chemistry between the real life couple Alagna and Gheorghiu is perfect, she outshines him with ease.

In top shape, however, was the second tenor of the evening, Marius Brenciu. He was completely one with his part—the cool and ironic "poet" Prunier. His lyric tenor mastered the playful split between the sarcasm and passion that are significant for the stressed intellectual lover of the hyperactive chambermaid Lisette. As his girlfriend who always makes faces at his attempts to transform her into a lady, Lisette Oropesa, with her cheerful, flexible (and sometimes shrill) soprano provided a great comic counterpart to Angela Gheorghiu.

With the spicy entrances of the comic couple, Puccini adds fun and balances the sentiment of the story.

## Chinese Instrument Brings Flavor to the DPA Orchestra

## The traditional Chinese woodwind: the suona

By ROSEMARIE FRUEHAUF  
Epoch Times Staff

The suona often takes on the lead role and adds to the Divine Performing Arts Orchestra's distinctive Chinese flavor. It also stars in several solos to support the funny characters on stage, like the seemingly crazy monk Jigong.

The Chinese oboe, the traditional suona is a woodwind instrument with many faces and a long history. The double-reed, cone-shaped instrument is carved from wood and features seven finger holes on the front and one on the back side. The wooden body is covered by a copper tube and a brass bell is fixed at the lower end.

The suona can produce a wide variety of tonal qualities. It can make an enormously loud and penetrative tone and so is perfectly suitable to illustrate huge emotions like joy or grief and therefore very popular for weddings, funeral processions, and military purposes. But it can be also very soft and sentimental, depending on the blowing technique. It often serves as an accompanying instrument for region-



TRADITIONAL SUONA PLAYERS: Chinese farmers play suonas, a traditional Chinese woodwind instrument. CHINA PHOTOS/GETTY IMAGES

al Chinese operas.

The three parts of the suona, its pipe, whistle, and horn can be taken apart and played separately, which creates even more possibilities for the player. Chirpy, joyful, and shrill (as only the suona can sound) make it predestined to imitate birds singing. The most popular solo piece for the suona is the "Homage to the Phoenix" ("Bai Niao Chao Feng") where hundreds of different birds raise their voices to praise the mystical bird king.

The suona's tone ranges two octaves within the Chinese pentatonic system, which does not comply with western tuning concepts. Suona players, when performing together with a Western orchestra, therefore, bring along more than one instrument in order to cover all

the Western notes of the scale.

In the 20th century the suona's tone range was widened and a lower and a higher suona were created. The bass suonas can be longer than a yard, and the smallest ones are only several inches long.

## The History of the Suona

Like many other traditional Chinese instruments, the suona dates back hundreds of years. It's said to have been originated in the Middle East or India where several very similar types of instruments were known, and from there reached China in the third century. Suona-playing beings are depicted among Buddhist deities in the 38th cave of the Kizil Grottoes in Baicheng of Xinjiang. The cave was dug in the fourth century.

After the 16th century, the suona became an instrument of the imperial Ming court and has since been one of the most popular wind instruments of the Han people. Over 20 ethnic Chinese minorities play the suona today. But it is also found in more than 30 other countries in Asia, Africa, and Europe.

As the suona can be blown using every technique appropriate for wind instruments and produce so many different sounds, it also has been adapted by jazz and rock musicians.

## THE ANTIDOTE—CLASSIC POETRY FOR MODERN LIFE

## A Reading of 'Fabien dei Franchi' by Oscar Wilde

By CHRISTOPHER NIELD

*Fabien dei Franchi*  
To My Friend Henry Irving

*The silent room, the heavy creeping shade,  
The dead that travel fast, the opening door,  
The murdered brother rising through the floor,  
The ghost's white fingers on thy shoulders laid,  
And then the lonely duel in the glade,  
The broken swords, the stifled scream, the gore,  
Thy grand revengeful eyes when all is o'er,—  
These things are well enough,—but thou wert made  
For more august creation! frenzied Lear  
Should at thy bidding wander on the heath  
With the shrill fool to mock him, Romeo  
For thee should lure his love, and desperate fear  
Pluck Richard's recreant dagger from its sheath—  
Thou trumpet set for Shakespeare's lips to blow!*

In this sonnet Oscar Wilde addresses his friend, the Victorian actor Sir Henry Irving, cautioning him not to waste his talent on mere trash, but to devote himself to the art of great tragedy.

The title comes from the now long-forgotten melodrama, "The Corsican Brothers," in which Irving played the twin brothers Fabien and Lucien Dei Franchi. The plot goes something like this: Lucien gets bumped off by a rival in love, but later reappears to his brother, demanding justice from the grave. Fabien swears revenge, tracks the murderer down and kills him in a duel. The end.

Initially, we thrill to Wilde's descriptions of "the silent room," "the dead that travel fast," and "the opening door." It all sounds like rip-roaring fun, although as the list goes on it turns into an avalanche of cliché.

"The murdered brother rising through the floor?" Ridiculous! The gothic tone becomes satirical, so by the time we get to "the stifled scream," it's difficult not to stifle our laughter.

(As an aside, there is a twist to these lines that Wilde could not have foreseen. The "ghost's white fingers," "the gore," the "revengeful eyes." Who does this remind us of today? In a word: Dracula. Indeed, it is believed that Bram Stoker, who worked as Irving's secretary, drew on the actor's tyrannical personality in his portrayal of the Transylvanian count. Perhaps all great actors are vampires as they strive to hypnotize our attention.)

Back to the poem: At the apex of the drama, as Irving's eyes gleam with triumph, the tone abruptly changes. As if clicking his fingers, and bringing us out of a trance, Wilde declares, "These things are well enough," but advises his friend to invest in "more august creation."

He should aspire to the very best. Wilde's voice as-

sumes a suitable gravitas as he summons forth a triptych of Shakespeare's characters in little dabs of verbal color.

Who do we see first? King Lear: the great patriarch driven from his kingdom and reduced to raging fury on the heath as his Fool, amid the lashing rain, offers up Zen-like maxims to humble his pride.

Next, Romeo makes his entrance: the great lover, pining for Juliet beneath her balcony, while proving the swashbuckling hero in the streets.

Finally, Richard III: the great villain and evil hunchback, drawing his "recreant" or cowardly dagger to rend another victim and finally gain the longed-for English crown. King, lover, and fiend: three immortal archetypes of human experience.

What distinguishes "King Lear" from "The Corsican Brothers," or from the average Hollywood film or TV soap opera? Wilde's poem provides a clue.

Notice, how, in the first eight lines, there are no names, no people, only stock situations. In the last six lines, Shakespeare's dramatis personae strut onto the stage, bringing with them the enormous psychological complexity that is so lacking from Fabien Dei Franchi or his modern equivalents, like Jason Bourne. We move

from the stereotypical to what really makes us tick.

The poem's final image sums it all up: Irving's lips are the instrument through which pours the overwhelming musical tempest of Shakespeare's genius. Nothing annoys me more than to hear his pounding soliloquies reduced to a tasteful murmur.

Shakespeare's language is not, and never was, tasteful. It is lush, purple, and explosive—designed to keep the unruly hordes at the Globe Theatre from pelting the poor players with rotten onions. An honest ham, for me, does more justice to that vision than an actor delivering his lines with exquisite diction, but with all passion spent.

But what about our lips? When we recite Wilde's poem, or Lear, or Romeo, or Richard III, it is not enough that we say the words aloud. We must put our heart and soul into them.

We need to pace the room and throw our arms around a bit! In so doing, something miraculous happens. We find that words, so drab, dated, and difficult on the page, become brilliantly alive.

That's why it's worth making the effort to read classic poetry. Unlike the vacuous entertainment we deaden our minds with, it breathes life back into us, like the trumpet blast that blows on the final day.

Oscar Wilde (1854-1900) was an Irish playwright, novelist, poet, and author of short stories. He is most famous for his play "The Importance of Being Earnest." Christopher Nield is a poet living in London. You can reach him at christophernield@hotmail.com.

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