

Classical Springtime

Julian Sachs (April 01, 2010)



March offered us new and old productions at the Met, the reprise of "Madama Butterfly" at New York City Opera, and two Muti programs with the Philharmonic. April promises lots of gems, with the Met's new "Armida", the farewell to Zeffirelli's "Traviata", and two Pollini recitals at Carnegie Hall.

Spring is here and the 2009-2010 seasons of New York's main companies still have a long list of remarkable events for music lovers in the Big Apple. The [Met](#) [2], for instance, is reprising a few of the productions that were featured during the Fall, such as Sonja Frisell's majestic Aida, which during its March performances starred the beautiful voice of Chinese soprano Hui He in the title role. Supporting her were the massive tone of mezzo-soprano [Dolora Zajick](#) [3], and the not-so-massive unconvincing performance of [Salvatore Licitra](#) [4], as Aida's lover Radamès. Paolo Carignani was supposed to conduct, but had to cancel, so Marco Armiliato replaced him and did a terrific job with the orchestra, delivering all the orchestral undertones of this amazing score with taste and dramatic sensibility.



The work of Italian-born costume designer Agostino Cavalca gives us the excuse to highlight the Met's new production of Ambroise Thomas' Hamlet. This production battles with Carmen and The Nose as arguably the best of this season's new productions so far, because of its clarity and directness. The opera's music, let's face it, is not especially interesting, although conductor Louis Langrée did a great job with the orchestra and conducted with passion and competence, supporting the magnificent interpretations of Simon Keenlyside as Hamlet, Marlis Petersen as Ophélie and [Jennifer Larmore](#) [5] as Gertrude, all of them with superb vocal techniques and flawless stage presences. The production, by Patrice Caurier and Moshe Leiser, mixed perfectly with the simple sets by Christian Fenouillat. Nothing on stage was without a dramatic purpose, and everything on stage ended up broken (or dead, in the case of the protagonists - excepting Gertrude, in this version of the Shakespearean tragedy), thus strengthening the opera by letting it breathe on its own.

Far away from that approach is Franco Zeffirelli's 1981 production of Puccini's La Bohème, rapidly moving towards its 400th performance at the Met, which it will probably reach in a few seasons. This time the main roles of Rodolfo and Mimi were sung respectively by [Piotr Beczala](#) [6] and [Anna Netrebko](#) [7], while Marco Armiliato, once again, led from the podium. Three of the four acts are very intimate and allow Zeffirelli to bring life and passion to his vignette-like sets, giving vent to his massive signature crowd scenes in Act II, where the whole of Paris seems to spill onto the streets of the Quartier Latin: each walk-on actor or chorus member has a story of his or her own and tries to act it out over the surrounding chaos. It does work stupendously, though, even after 29 years. The Zeffirelli era is ending: his Tosca was supplanted by Bondy's production that opened this season, and next month will be the final performances of his Traviata, which will clear the stage for Willy Decker's production next season.

Also at [Lincoln Center](#) [8] was the revival of [New York City Opera](#) [9]'s successful Madama Butterfly, originally mounted in 1998. The production by Mark Lamos fits the narrative beautifully and allows the public to focus on Butterfly's tragedy while she moves around her apartment, the almost empty stage enclosed within two large sets of shoji screens. Shu-Ying Li delivered a terrific performance in the title role, pining for her beloved Lt. B.F. Pinkerton, sung by tenor [Steven Harrison](#) [10], whose voice showed quality and musicality but lacked power and was frequently drowned out by his colleagues and the orchestra, which was guided flawlessly and without compromises by George Manahan.

Ever since the Classical New York column began in January there hasn't been a single article that didn't include something about [Riccardo Muti](#) [11] performing in town. And luckily we can continue the tradition. While receiving tremendous success at the Met with his final performances of Attila, the Maestro spent the other three or four nights a week conducting the [New York Philharmonic](#) [12] in two outstanding programs, obtaining equally enthusiastic recognition. For the first time ever he shared the stage with the great Hungarian pianist András Schiff, who happens to live in Florence, the city where Muti led the [Maggio Musicale](#) [13] festival early in his career, from 1968 to 1980. Together, they delivered an exciting performance of the Brahms Piano Concerto N. 1; the concert closed with Hindemith's bombastic Symphony in E-flat. Muti's second series of concerts featured another great soloist, Siberian-born violinist [Vadim Repin](#) [14], in Beethoven's Violin Concerto, followed by Franck's Symphony in D minor.

Although the Maestro will be back in April for his final performances with the Philharmonic, it will be with a limited orchestra, shrunk to the right size for performing Mozart's Symphony No. 34, Schubert's Symphony N. 4, and Boccherini's Cello Concerto in D, featuring the Philharmonic's own outstanding first cellist, [Carter Brey](#) [15].

Beyond being able to see more Madama Butterfly at City Opera, New Yorkers can also attend performances of the 1904 "Brescia version" of the opera as performed by the small but courageous [Dicapo Opera Theater](#) [16]. Puccini wrote five versions of Butterfly before settling for the "standard version" of 1907 commonly performed today. The second version, known as the "Brescia version" was

performed in 1904 in the Lombard city after the original "La Scala" version ended in disaster. This new version was a success, although it is understandably rarely performed today.

We have already mentioned the final performances of Zeffirelli's *La Traviata* at the Met, and April will also give opera lovers a chance to review the season's opener, *Tosca*. But the month's highlight is without a doubt the new Mary Zimmerman production of Rossini's *Armida*, conducted by Riccardo Frizza and featuring [Renée Fleming](#) [17] in the title role - the only female voice in the opera (chorus excluded), versus two basses and six tenors, among whom [Lawrence Brownlee](#) [18] as Rinaldo, *Armida*'s lover. Brownlee, also in this year's *Il Barbiere di Siviglia*, will be discussing these two roles and his operatic career on April 13 at NYU's [Casa Italiana Zerilli-Marimò](#) [19], as part of their *Adventures in Italian Opera* series, in conversation with [Fred Plotkin](#) [20]. On April 30, again at Casa Italiana, will be the World Premiere of Italian composer Roberto Scarcella Perino's *Piano Concerto No. 1*, together with other works by the artist.

Turning our attention towards [Carnegie Hall](#) [21], the New England Symphonic Ensemble will be performing Vivaldi's *Gloria* on April 26, conducted by Carol Krueger. The sacred work will feature the Livingstone College Concert Choir and the Canadian University College Choir.

After having starred in Paolo Benvenuti's film *Puccini e la fanciulla*, Italian composer and actor [Riccardo Joshua Moretti](#) [22] presents a "multimedia event," *The Puccini Experience*, at Carnegie Zankel on April 11. Something between a concert, a lecture, and a film, it includes the composer himself at the piano together with flutist [Claudio Ferrarini](#) [23] and violist Christoph E. Langheim. At Carnegie Weill, on April 17, there will be another interesting cauldron of art forms, with Dutch composer Louis Andriessen's film opera *La Commedia*, based on Dante, Vondel and the Old Testament, starring Italian singer [Cristina Zavalloni](#) [24].

Sondra Radvanovsky and [Dmitri Hvorostovsky](#) [25] are familiar faces at the Met and have recently sung there together in Verdi's *Il Trovatore*. On April 1 they will be singing a recital together, featuring mainly music by the same composer. Accompanying them will be the National Philharmonic, led by Marco Armiliato. Also, Italian pianist Maurizio Pollini will be doing two all-Chopin recitals on April 18 and 29, including the 24 Preludes, Op. 28 and the *Scherzo No. 1*. It will be a great opportunity to celebrate the 200th anniversary of the composer's birth together with an artist who, ever since he won first prize at the International Chopin Competition in Warsaw in 1960, has been considered one of the world's leading Chopin interpreters.

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