

PERFORMINGARTS

Robert Carsen's  
thrilling staging of  
Strauss' *Ariadne auf  
Naxos* at the  
Bavarian State Opera



# The Modern Art of Opera

Presenting TIMELESS MASTERPIECES for a contemporary audience.

By Jacquelin Carnegie

**WHAT IS OPERA?** It's the age-old art of storytelling enhanced by marvelous music, superb singing and stagings so glorious they take your breath away. Even if you don't like the art form, you have to concede that it's like theater, only more impressive—everything on a grand scale. Many believe it's an entertainment that can be appreciated only by an older, elite audience. This is simply not true.

Here in the U.S., particularly in New York where ticket prices are high, it's easy to understand why people see it that way. But it's been shown time and again that if opera is presented in affordable and innovative ways, the young will show an interest.

What is true at many opera houses in America (mostly because of cost, not taste): the average age of the audience is "retired." No matter how beautiful the music, you can't build a future on stats like that. The challenge ahead for opera companies is how to keep the traditional opera-going public happy while attracting a younger, sustainable audience.

A few years ago, the New York opera world was thrown a lifeline when the Houdini of arts and culture, Peter Gelb, was named general manager of the Metropolitan Opera. With a mission to entice world-class theater directors to create more dramatic productions at the Met, Mr. Gelb launched a number of inspired initiatives to make the Met's productions available to a wider, more diverse audience. Some examples: \$20 rush tickets for weekday performances; \$15 tickets for *The Met: Live in HD*, shown

in movie theaters across North America, Europe, Australia and Japan; and free big screen transmissions of opening night performances in Lincoln Center Plaza and Times Square in NYC.

These initiatives, intended to entice people to attend live performances, have been wildly successful, and many of them have been adopted by opera houses around the world. But not all of the Met's new productions by inventive directors have been equally welcomed. One in particular, the new *Tosca* by Swiss director Luc Bondy, was booed on opening night (not the performers themselves, but the production team).

The reaction was shocking, although the booing probably had more to do with nostalgia for the traditional Zeffirelli version than the crowd's actual dislike of the Bondy staging (which was magnificent, though more contemporary). It almost seems counterintuitive: New York, the most dynamic city in the world, has one of the most conservative, change-resistant opera-going audiences.

Conversely, when one thinks of Munich, Germany (the capital of Bavaria), quaint comes to mind, not cutting edge. Yet some of the most exciting opera productions on the planet are being performed at the *Bayerische Staatsoper* (Bavarian State Opera), where Mozart himself presided.

An emphasis on the theatrical element of opera, including the visual aspect, began at the BSO under former general manager Sir Peter Jonas. Nikolaus Bachler, the current intendant, continues this trend with brio. He believes the mandate of an opera house should be to encourage and challenge audiences, not frighten them away. However, he did say (to Jens F. Laurson in *PlaybillArts*) that, "Public taste is always behind the times." He also points out that the "traditional" productions U.S. opera-goers cling to are actually from the 1950s, not the 1820s, which were "more radical than you can even imagine."

*Regietheater* (director's theater) or "high-concept production" thrives at the Bavarian State Opera. But to be fair, the BSO is not dependent on ticket sales. In Europe, most opera houses are state sponsored, while their U.S. counterparts depend on sales and



donations from conservative, wealthy patrons to stay afloat. Still, Mr. Bachler asserts, "Major operas from the 17th century to today all deal with the same theme—the struggle of being human. An audience should be moved by the story, and that emotion should create a lasting impression. This is what theater, and especially opera, can do like no other art form. It is our duty to re-create art that communicates something to people."

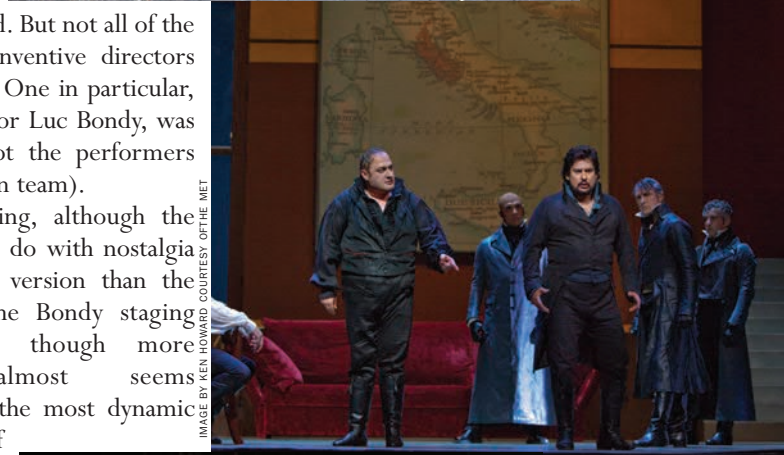
Two recent stunning examples of regietheater at the BSO—Robert Carsen's staging of Strauss' *Ariadne auf Naxos* and Christof Loy's production of Donizetti's *Lucrezia Borgia*—took place on a basically bare stage. This did not distract from the gorgeous voices, and actually heightened one's concentration on the music and the poignant plots.

Of course, not everyone comes to the opera house to see a bare stage. So back to today's challenge: how to attract a younger, diverse audience without alienating conventional opera-goers? According to Anthony Freud of the Houston Grand Opera, this is achieved by consistently offering high quality productions and a choice of repertoire. "Give an audience operas they want as well as those that will expand their horizons. Gain their trust by offering quality, then lead them on a path of discovery." In the opinion of Joseph Melillo, executive producer at BAM

(Brooklyn Academy of Music), steps along that path should include some contemporary operas and newly-commissioned works. Because even the most traditionalist opera buffs want to stay *au courant*.

When Peter Gelb took over at the Met, his initial act of magic was to make free tickets available (for the first time in the Met's 126-year history) to the dress rehearsal of Anthony Minghella's new production of Puccini's *Madame Butterfly*. As early as 8 a.m., Lincoln Center Plaza was filled with thousands of young, multi-cultural people waiting for tickets, proving yet again that opera is loved not just by the nearly dead. As Met officials handed out two free tickets per person, they jokingly said, "If you're not going to use the other ticket, give it to someone under thirty!"

But that's no joke—it's the punch line. Audiences can boo all they want at innovation, but if opera companies do not forge ahead to present exciting, new productions of the old classics, in a few short years, there will be no one waiting in line. ♦



**Top: A pared-down production of *Lucrezia Borgia* at the Bavarian State Opera  
Middle: A scene between Scarpia and Cavaradossi in Luc Bondy's contemporary production of *Tosca*  
Bottom: The same scene from the beloved Zeffirelli staging**