

OPERA NEWS

IN REVIEW > INTERNATIONAL
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Rita

MUNICH

Staatstheater am Gärtnerplatz

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GAETANO DONIZETTI COMPOSED his one-act chamber opera *Rita* in

1841, more-or-less on a whim, while visiting Paris. The finished score was put aside, never to be performed in the composer's lifetime. This charming work was first performed on May 7, 1860, twelve years after Donizetti's death, at the Opéra Comique in Paris.

Munich's Staatstheater am Gärtnerplatz chose to stage this gem on its small studio stage, where the audience capacity is only 120 (seen July 10). In under an hour, with a cast of only three singers backed by a small orchestra, Donizetti has packed a humorously absurd story with an alternating flow of bel canto melody and comic text-intensive ensembles. The raked studio stage juts out into the public, the café-restaurant, designed by Karl Fehringer and Judith Leikauf is realistically, impressively dingy, in authentic 1960s small-town Italian style.

Maximilian Berling directed with a sure hand, utilizing the small acting space well and creating just the right atmosphere for the lively interaction of his soloists. Thomas Pigor, well known for his original texts, satire and cabaret, has replaced the Vaez' French libretto with a new German text. This proved a problem, as silliness and frivolity do not translate well into German and the language does not lend itself to a cavalcade of words. Even Pigor's topical potshots (the action now takes place in Lower Bavaria) fell mostly flat. Pigor also significantly changed important aspects of the story—including the ending.

All three soloists were outstanding. Tenor Gyula Rab brought a wry sense of comedy, an entrancing sound and fine technique to the role of Peppe. Baritone Ludwig Mittelhammer convinced with a rock-solid voice and just the right dose of overconfident preening that the role of Gaspar requires. Soprano Cecilia Gaetani showed a luxurious voice of more than ample size in the role of the shrewish Rita. She did have some problems enunciating the sung German text although, to her credit, her German dialogue was as clear as a bell. Conductor Oleg Ptashnikov and his chamber Ensemble caught the spirit of the work splendidly.

Rounding out the Gärtnerplatz season, two additional performances are more than worthy of mention. On July 7, the Gärtnerplatz presented the European premiere of *Tootsie*, David Yazbeck and Robert Horn's musical version of the 1982 film comedy. The staging by musical expert Gil Mehmert, the scintillating choreography by Adam Cooper, a rotating set designed by Karl Fehringer and Judith Leykauf, with scenes melting seamlessly into each other—and an outstanding headed by the stupendous Armin Kahl in the title role—made for an evening more than worthy of the long standing ovations it received. This is a production that should remain in the Gärtnerplatz repertoire for years to come.

This season, Bernstein's *Candide* was welcomed back into the main house. Adam Cooper's production, originally produced and performed in 2015 at the old Riding Hall while the Gärtnerplatz was being renovated, fit well onto the bigger stage, retaining all its verve, wit and musical excellence. The entire cast was first-rate. Tenor Maximilian Mayer assumed the title role for the first time and on May 13 he sang with such tonal beauty, phrased with such depth of expression and acted with such sincere commitment that his portrayal left absolutely nothing to be desired. Joining him was soprano Ilia Staple who gave a virtuoso performance as Cunegonde. —Jeffrey A. Leipsic