

Lead us into temptation

Fiona Maddocks



Così fan tutte

Royal Opera House, London WC2;
in rep until 16 March

The Monstrous Child

Linbury theatre, Royal Opera House,
London WC2; ends today

Robin Hood

Bussey Building, London SE15;
in rep until Sat

With a new cast and conductor, the Royal Opera's Così clicks into place. And two new operas explore different shades of gruesome

We all have inebriates. Mine – one of them – is not to re-read what I've written about a performer or production in advance of returning, an attempt to banish expectation. Some things slip from the mind anyway, pushed out by the fast stream of subsequent encounters. So quite truthfully I can say I had no recollection of how energetically I disliked the Royal Opera's *Così fan tutte* when it was new in 2016. I was reminded (by a tweet) of my original, cross review hours after thoroughly enjoying the production's first revival last week.

The busy, too slow, too indulgent and not well enough sung, was the gist of my reaction last time. It's sobering to see the degree to which

a production can become the prism of all that's wrong, even when the real difficulties lie elsewhere. *Così* can feel unpalatable when it's not working. When it ensnares you, which this revival did from the furiously brisk overture onwards, no music is more extraordinary, no analysis of the human psyche more perceptive. A new cast and conductor acted like an adrenaline boost.

The period instrument specialist Stefano Montanari, making his house conducting debut, also attacked the fortepiano continuo with all the wild excess and embellishment of a Wurlitzer organist vamping for a silent movie. Mozart, a masterly keyboard improviser, would surely have approved. Montanari's lavish ornamentation, harmonic wanderings and musical jokes may have irritated some, but this injection of musical freedom gave vitality and endless wit. The ROH orchestra put on their best zest, woodwind fruity, strings lithe.

The theatre-within-theatre concept of German director Jan Philipp Gloger, so restless before, worked skilfully, various proscenium, costumes, backdrops and lighting schemes whisking us stylistically from 18th-century frock coat to modern dress. Since the swapping of the two pairs of lovers is a game, invented by the master of ceremonies Don Alfonso (Thomas Allen inhabiting the role with savvy froideur), it's a legitimate solution. Despina (Serena Gamberoni, audacious and versatile) has limitless opportunities for reinvention, not just as quack doctor and marriage lawyer but as maid, confidante and woman of the world.



Gyula Orendt (Guglielmo) and Paolo Fanale (Ferrando) in *Così fan tutte* at the Royal Opera House: 'endless vitality and wit'. Photograph by Tristram Kenton

The male lovers, too often identikit, were rigorously delineated: the inconsistent jealousy of Guglielmo (Gyula Orendt) fierce and disturbing, the switch from smugness to confusion of Paolo Fanale's light-voiced Ferrando all too realistic. Serena Malfi and Salome Jicia as Dorabella and Fiordiligi were well matched, physically and vocally. Jicia's arias (Come scoglio and Per pietà), her coloratura gleaming, were the pivotal highlights they should be.

With the impact of Stuart MacRae's *Anthropocene* still resonating, two more new operas – both deft, and contrasting, firsts for their youthful composers – are testimony to the buoyancy of the form. The revamped ROH Linbury theatre hosted the **The Monstrous Child** by the British composer Gavin Higgins. Based on the young adults' book by Francesca Simon, who was also the librettist, it will appeal to anyone keen on human putrefaction – it is gruesomely gruesome – and the long, none too redemptive arm of fate. Boldly and inventively

staged and designed (by Timothy Sheader and Paul Wills), it reworks Norse myth through the figure of Hel, half human, half corpse. A first infatuation, call it love, comes to nothing. Higgins has an immediate style, heady and expressive, which serves the darkness of the action. I'm still not sure, and does it matter, which age group would most have thrilled to it. Maybe the sight of all-too realistic corpses entering the underworld still attached to their hospital tubes grows less amusing as the years pass, but hey. It was faultlessly done, the cast led by Marta Fontanals-Simmons with



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Tom Randle, Lucy Schauer, Graeme Broadbent and Dan Shelvey, and lovely playing from members of Aurora Orchestra conducted by Jessica Cottis.

Brief praise, too, for the Opera Story, impressively intent on commissioning new works and now into its third year. **Robin Hood**, by composer Dani Howard and librettists Zoe Palmer and Rebecca Hurst, was premiered, up close, at the Bussey Building, expertly conducted by Berrak Dyer and directed by Polly Graham. The anti-hero Robin is a bilious, amoral MP – no, really – part of a dubious male club whose members dress up in green hats, tights and jerkins. All comes to grief via a businesswoman, a boomtown development in the forest and a dead child. It's a black tale, with perhaps too many elements to have its full force, but done with zest (some great singing from all), and with a beautifully precise, well played score. The young Michael Tippett wrote a forgotten opera about Robin Hood. Bring on the revival.