

Operatic precocity

by Heather Mac Donald

A twelve-year-old British girl has written an opera of astounding wit, craft, and musical beauty. It received a theatrically riveting production by California's Opera San José this December, with the composer, Alma Deutscher, playing the violin, piano, and organ. Given the current cultural imperative to champion "strong women" and "girl power," you would think that Deutscher's accomplishments would be widely known. They are not, however, because Deutscher and her opera pose a conscious challenge to contemporary values in classical music and art.

The phrase "child prodigy" produces revulsion in many people, conjuring images of trained human seals being exploited by greedy parents for financial gain. So let's simply say that Deutscher is a phenomenal musical talent and that her parents are anything but exploitative, instead working zealously to protect her innocence. Since age five, she has been studying composition via Skype with a teacher in a Swiss village, who uses a method of training from eighteenth-century Naples. Young boys in a Neapolitan orphanage were efficiently turned into court and chapel musicians by improvising contrapuntal harmonies over bass lines. A third of the music in colonial Williamsburg was composed by products of the Naples school. Deutscher and her teacher, Tobias Cramm, improvise together across the Channel on their respective keyboards, turning phrases from Bach's *Well-Tempered Clavier*, say, upside-down and inside-out, experimenting with harmonies and modulations. Robert Gjerdingen, a Northwest-

ern University musicologist, wrote the book on Neapolitan improvisation that inspired Deutscher's father to seek out the same training for his musically precocious daughter. Gjerdingen has been offering advice on her compositions since then. "At five you could say that her music was childlike but showed promise," he says. "At seven, she came back with something gorgeous. At ten, she started learning orchestration. Now she can improvise complex stuff beyond what music Ph.D.'s can do."

Deutscher's ear vacuums up musical languages from the eighteenth to the mid-twentieth century. Her piano concerto, which she premiered at the keyboard with the Vienna Chamber Orchestra in 2017, sounds like an amalgam of Muzio Clementi and Chopin, with some Donizetti thrown in for good measure. Her opera, *Cinderella*, is a massive step forward in terms of musical and psychological complexity. Deutscher has been fascinated with the Cinderella story since age three; a fantastically Fauvist drawing she made in 2011 depicts Cinderella and her two stepsisters with elongated limbs and torsos, swaying like exotic insects. Showing a "you go girl" streak herself, she objected to the fact that Cinderella's defining attribute was her small foot. When she started collecting musical ideas in 2013 for an opera, she modified the story to make the title character a composer. The Prince, rather than seeking her out via her lost slipper, would track her down after the ball with one of her melodies.

Deutscher's Cinderella is an alter ego for the composer; like Deutscher, she is assailed

by tunes that keep pouring into her head. And the work is a send-up of the operatic genre itself, satirizing its conventions and singers' foibles. Deutscher and her parents conceived the ingenious plot; it is tauter and more dramatically compelling than many a Verdian story. (Alma's father, Guy Deutscher, is a linguist at Oxford University.) The libretto was a joint effort between her parents and various poets and dramatists. It started out in Hebrew, was translated into German for a Viennese performance in 2016, and ended up in English for the San Jose production. The text is both down-to-earth and literary, with a predilection for Shakespearean couplets to end scenes.

Cinderella lives with her stepmother and stepsisters in an opera house formerly run by her late father; she spends her days drearily copying out scores for their stage performances. The court minister arrives at the opera house to announce a royal ball whereat the Prince will choose a bride, but instead of leaving the family with the invitation, he mistakenly delivers a pharmacy prescription just given the king for his many ailments. The stepmother and stepsisters puzzle over the gruesome references to "ulcerations," "fungal inflammations," and "red and itchy boils," before deciding that they have before them an example of "modern poetry," written by the Prince to express his romantic pain. Since the ball will feature a singing competition for the amusement of the guests, they conclude that this is the text they are to set to music and perform. The tuneless stepsisters are unable to come up with a melody, but the stepmother finds a lilting song composed by Cinderella and steals it for her daughter to use when singing the medical prescription at the ball.

The stolen melody idea was inspired by Walther's stolen poem in Wagner's *Die Meistersinger*. Unlike Wagner, however, Deutscher has an effervescent sense of musical humor. The resulting complications from the switched medical prescription are musically and dramatically hilarious. Deutscher has been steeped in the *buffa* tradition; she estimates that she has seen "all of the happy operas," certainly all of Rossini's comedies. Guy Deutscher has been more careful doling out tragedies. *Tosca*

was playing at the San Francisco Opera during *Cinderella's* run, but the family did not attend it because the story is too dark. "I grew up in Israel," he said before a matinee performance of *Cinderella*. "I know that an early exposure to ugliness can scar your soul." *Rigoletto* has also been off limits, though Deutscher has seen *La Traviata* (her "first sad opera" she says), and she loves *Eugene Onegin*.

The *Cinderella* score is melody-driven; leit-motifs pour forth in profusion, melding into each other. Its musical language is a pleasing hybrid of opera, operetta, and the American musical. The overture opens with a shimmering Wagnerian diminished chord that blooms into sunlight and the opera's main themes. Schubert's Ländler and rippling song accompaniments are a pervasive influence. Though it is unlikely Deutscher has heard Schubert's operatic rarity *Fierrabras*, certain passages recall its harmonic progressions. She turns the opening of Dvořák's bittersweet A-major waltz, Op. 54, into a love duet between the Prince and Cinderella. *Der Rosenkavalier's* galumphing music for Baron Ochs and John Corigliano's bumptious Figaro aria in *The Ghosts of Versailles* echo here in the comic ball and court scenes, though the connection with Corigliano likely represents a coincidental mining of musical possibilities rather than direct influence. Some of the wind writing—passing a motif from clarinet to oboe to bassoon—recalls Tchaikovsky. The Prince has the most thrilling melody of the opera—a passionate outcry of yearning, accompanied by a pounding pulse in the low strings and brass. Unfortunately, the theme, "Burn for me, flame of love," doesn't go anywhere after its first few modulations upwards, but is always cut off by another singer's interjection.

Deutscher's favorite musicals are *My Fair Lady* and *The Sound of Music*; here, the Fairy's soaring invocation of a star called Hope is a pure Rodgers and Hammerstein paean to the power of positive thinking. A syncopated outburst from the King in response to his son's romantic intransigence could come right out of *Sweeney Todd*, though there is no chance that Deutscher has heard that work, if *Rigoletto* is too

sinister. Here, again, it turns out that there are different paths to similar musical discoveries.

To call up these comparisons is not to suggest that the opera sounds derivative. It is a unique work that speaks the language of a long musical tradition. To be sure, there are some pedestrian tunes and times when the orchestra merely parrots the vocal line. But the sheer amount of orchestral and vocal invention is stunning. Deutscher's most impressive accomplishment is her mastery of the classical tradition's rich resources for expressing dramatic conflict. After the ball, the Prince has a despairing minor-key soliloquy, trying to understand why the masked composer, whose song captivated him, ran off from their encounter without giving her name. The King enters in a rambunctious mood, believing that his son has finally found a mate. He tries to tease out the details of his son's conquest. When the Prince pensively reveals that he not only went outside with a woman but went to the balcony with her, the King draws a prolonged, delighted breath: "Oh, the *balcony!*" and gives a knowing wink to his minister. The rapid alternations in their music—the Prince's plaintive and introspective, the King's rollicking and extroverted—vividly delineates their opposing mental states. The King's joviality turns to exasperation when he learns that his son knows neither the name, face, nor social position of his balcony companion. The Prince interrupts at full tenorial bray, in an indistinct key: "And she is the girl I will MAAAAA-RRY!" The King and the minister wince and stick their fingers in their ears, one of the production's many self-referential digs. The Prince draws an even more disgusted response from his father when he retorts that he knows everything that matters about the mystery woman: he knows the "melody of her soul?" "The melody of her soul!" the King spits out in disbelief. "I've heard enough of this nonsense. Life is not an opera!"

Wit is an adult trait, entailing irony and distance. Comedy is harder to write than tragedy, which is why there are—sadly—so comparatively few of them. When a ten-year-old pianist captures the pathos of a Mozart minor-key concerto, the question arises whether a child can possibly understand the emotional depths

that he is conveying, or if he is simply an unwitting mouthpiece for the music. Here, too, one wonders whether Deutscher is as wise about human foibles as her score suggests, or whether she has simply absorbed certain musical tropes which do the work on their own. It is hard to say, but her intellectual precocity suggests that she may be a quick learner in matters beyond music.

The inevitable benchmark presents itself: the young Amadeus. It is an impossible comparison, yet it worms its way in. Mozart, too, composed an opera at age twelve—more precisely, a *Singspiel* (a comedy in German with spoken dialogue). The bravura momentum of the orchestral music in *Bastien und Bastienne*, written at the height of the galant period, has no counterpart in *Cinderella*. But the psychological characterizations in the latter are far more acute; the characters in Mozart's *Singspiel* remain bland pastoral stereotypes, despite Mozart's music. He was likely hindered by the generic qualities of the text, which was a parody of Rousseau's influential court entertainment *Le devin du village*. But Deutscher also has the resources of another 150 years of musical expression to draw upon.

The San Jose production was literally a labor of love. "Without exception, everyone adores her," says the conductor, Jane Glover, a highly regarded Mozart specialist. "We all wanted to make it the best for her." And they did. The baritone Nathan Stark as the King and the soprano Mary Dunleavy as the Stepmother stood out for their theatrical charisma. I spoke with a friend of Stark's before the curtain rose. "She's a genius," he had told her. "It was amazing to be ordered around by a twelve-year-old." Stark, whose voice is richly grained and resonant, exploited the comic delights of gestural exaggeration to the hilt, playing his emotions broadly and for maximal comic effect. Though young, he touchingly conveyed the wobbles and bluster of an old man.

Deutscher's father may be trying to protect her from premature knowledge of evil, but the cruelty of Mary Dunleavy's Stepmother was almost unbearable. Dunleavy's clear soprano could switch instantaneously from hypocritical

syrup to a full-throated shriek. Deutscher phonetically memorized in German “Der Hölle Rache,” the Queen of the Night’s show stopping aria from *The Magic Flute*, when she was four. The Stepmother’s rage-filled coloratura passages were part of the opera’s self-referential satire; Dunleavy furled them out with power and precision.

Stacey Tappan and Karin Mushegain as the two stepsisters uninhibitedly turned themselves into childish shrews, unafraid to distort their faces and voices in impotent jealousy. Jonas Hacker as the Prince enunciated his spoken lines with rounded aristocratic syllables reminiscent of the baritone Thomas Hampson; his tenor was warm and dignified. Vanessa Beccera had a more mature soprano and wide vibrato than might be ideal for the title role, but she nevertheless winningly conveyed Cinderella’s sweetness. The director, Brad Dalton, kept the stage action dynamic without gratuitous fussiness. The sets by Steven Kemp and the costumes by Johann Stegmeir were lovely recreations, in sky blue, dusty rose, and lemon yellow, of a Baroque theater and palace interiors. Glover led the Opera San José orchestra in a tight, windswept performance, clearly delineating the quicksilver changes of mood.

Deutscher is fully aware of the challenge her music poses to the classical composing establishment. At our meeting, she has just bounced into the living room of a modest bungalow in San Jose, where she and her family are living for the duration of the run. She is in pigtails, pink socks, and a red crocheted tunic over red leggings; she radiates enthusiasm and good cheer, giving me a broad, happy smile and speaking breathlessly but precisely. “Quite a few people tell me this is not the kind of music that is allowed to be written now,” she says. “I have to find my own musical voice, they say. But I never lost my voice, I don’t need to find a new one. I’m writing in the language of music.” Deutscher rejects the idea that musical development is teleological and one-way. “I’m not going back,” she says emphatically. “I just want to write beautiful music that people want to listen to. This is the music that is performed everywhere. My music is therefore very modern. I’m alive, I’m a child, I’m not going back to the

past.” She has been told that people search in vain for dissonance in her music. She counters that dissonance and its resolution inheres in the very structure of classical form.

Deutscher is not exaggerating the reaction to her music. Every composer I spoke to was dismissive at best, though their responses were undoubtedly driven by suspicion of the child prodigy phenomenon as well. None had heard the opera, but only clips of earlier works on the web.

An American music professor who teaches out West advised me: “Were I you, I would not dignify [her opera] by writing about it.” A British composer who has consulted for American orchestras said that he was barely able to sit still while listening to the web excerpts of Deutscher’s music. “I found the interviews pretty disturbing, too,” he said. “In fact very disturbing. The overall effect is, I think, thoroughly creepy. I just don’t hear her working the material, and I suppose that’s what I mean by composing. There’s so little sense of contradiction.”

Boris Zelkin, a film and TV composer living in Los Angeles, acknowledged her “tremendous talent,” but cautioned that “her ability to organize sounds in ways they have been organized before . . . says nothing about her abilities to create things that are new. She’s working with anachronisms. . . . Her choice to find her voice in the works of the past makes me less excited about her and it makes me question the current state of Serious Music,” he wrote in an email.

William Bolcom, best known for his piano rags and his cabaret collaborations with his wife Joan Morris, was the most tolerant. Her music is “uncanny,” he said. “But I don’t feel as if I’d heard from her so much as her near-perfect channeling of whatever obscure composer she has ‘contacted.’” Bolcom said he can easily empathize with someone who finds music today too discordant, because, as a product of our discordant world, it is. But his own writing, he said, though skirting many old styles, is “always transformed by the fact I’m here in this moment.”

Jane Glover was unequivocal about Deutscher’s accomplishments, but she, too,

applied a teleological framework to them. Glover first encountered Deutscher's music when a retired British music agent sent her a video of the less ambitious *Cinderella* production from Vienna. "I thought it was something extraordinary," she says, sitting in the lobby of the Westin San Jose during an afternoon off. "I continue to be as startled by her gift as when I first looked at it. The craft of it is utterly remarkable." Deutscher has a phenomenally good ear for instrumentation, Glover says. The orchestration (on which Deutscher has admittedly had advice) is "remarkably, incredibly competent," if her vocal writing is still awkward at times.

But Glover was just as insistent that Deutscher was not yet speaking in her "own voice." "She can't go on writing like this for the rest of her life," she said. "What is remarkable for a twelve-year-old wouldn't be for an adult. The language of music has moved on." And the sign that Deutscher has reached her own voice will be increasing dissonance in her music. Glover found the "moments of chaos" in the score most compelling. A theme associated with *Cinderella* is taken up by the orchestra and "distorted"—such passages provide a "glimpse of what might be," Glover said.

Of course, if Deutscher were writing in a post-Reichian idiom, no one would accuse her of needing to find her voice. It was once taken for granted that artists would learn their craft by imitating the masters of the past. Few young composers today, however, have had an immersion in Classical theory and music. They draw instead on pop, film music, jazz, and hip-hop. It is no wonder that their writing is so remote from the tradition that Deutscher naturally breathes.

Admittedly, there is something intuitively persuasive about the teleological argument. We have become used to the ideas that artistic style moves in one direction only and that the artistic past is off limits for anything other than brief archaeological visits. Deutscher, however, presents a natural experiment in the evolution of musical expression. As she inhales more and more music, will she point the way towards a path not taken in the Western classical

tradition, one that avoids going off the cliff of atonality? Perhaps she will reveal that the language of thematic development was not in fact exhausted, contrary to received wisdom. The predominant characteristic of today's serious music is no longer even atonality; it is the substitution of mere sound for harmonic structure. Kaija Saariaho's *L'Amour de loin*, with its mysterious soundscapes, is a prime example. Perhaps, however, music still remains to be written that allows a listener to enter the movement of a composer's mind.

And yet, Deutscher may end up recreating the history of twentieth-century music, in an ontogeny-recapitulates-phylogeny moment, whether because the earlier harmonic language was in fact spent or because the influence of contemporary style is simply overwhelming.

Deutscher herself is not immune to the lure of novelty. She thought that she had found a new harmony, but then heard it in Bruckner's Seventh Symphony. "I was annoyed," she says. "He stole my chord." She may find that twentieth-century musical history is always one step ahead of her own experiments. Or she may discover an alternative musical universe.

Many people are waiting with bated breath to see what happens next. "Professional musicians are asking themselves: 'What is this and where does this go?'" says Gjerdingen. The conductor Simon Rattle was taken aback, Gjerdingen reports, when Deutscher came backstage after a performance of Rameau's *Les Boréades* to inquire about a chord, which she played on the piano. "I haven't seen anything like" her inborn sense of harmony, Rattle said in 2017.

There is still an enormous amount of music to be absorbed. She has not yet experienced the complete *St. Matthew Passion*. Glover would like her to listen to Janáček, in particular *The Cunning Little Vixen*. After the San Jose run of *Cinderella*, she was planning to spend more time with *Tristan und Isolde*. Any work that you pour into her may change the output, so deeply does she synthesize musical influence.

What is clear is that it is premature to expect a twelve-year-old to have a defined artistic voice. It is enough to have mastered the structures of the past. The fact that she is a highly competent violinist and pianist also unites her

to a bygone composing tradition. Most of today's young composers can barely play any instrument, certainly not well, says Andrew Balio, the principal trumpet in the Baltimore Symphony Orchestra and the founder of the Future Symphony Institute.

Deutscher's current projects include a musical, for which she has been gathering melodies, though she doesn't have a plot. Eventually, she wants to write film music. She has composed a first movement for a symphony and some movements for a string quartet. "I love starting something but I get bored and it's more difficult to finish," she says, showing something in common with the rest of us.

The arts funding world is going to be painfully conflicted. On the one hand, she is female: Good! On the other hand, she writes in a traditional idiom and her imagination resonates to the West's heroic narratives: Bad! Despite her girl-power revision, Deutscher's *Cinderella* story rests on powerful archetypes of chivalry and romance. The Prince still kneels to put Cinderella's slipper back on, though nothing in the plot hangs on the gesture, because the image embodies the ideal of masculine strength humbling itself before feminine grace.

Here, by contrast, are some of the contemporary operas that were staged around the time of *Cinderella*'s American premiere: Opera Philadelphia presented *We Shall Not Be Moved*, which explored persistent structural injustices, such as the marginalization of the gender-fluid, inflicted on Philadelphia's communities of color. John Adams's *Girls of the Golden West* premiered in San Francisco. *The American Conservative*'s Bradley Anderson described it as "peak identity politics." The white males were all evil, responsible for the plot's racial violence, environmental destruction, and capitalist predation. Pittsburgh Opera gave *As One*, a story of a transgender woman, earlier in 2017. Not surprisingly, its 2014 premiere at the Brooklyn Academy of Music was a magnet for

foundation and government grants, receiving funding from OPERA America's Opera Discovery Grants for Female Composers Program, the Virginia B. Toulmin Foundation, the New York State Council on the Arts, the New York State Legislature, and the National Endowment for the Arts.

Outside of the Packard Humanities Institute, which underwrote the San Jose production, it is hard to think of many foundations that would be interested in funding an unironic fairy tale of love at first sight with a handsome prince. But Deutscher may not need much philanthropic support. In November 2017, *60 Minutes* ran a profile of her in advance of the *Cinderella* premiere. As the segment traveled across U.S. time zones, tickets started selling out. By the time the profile aired on the West Coast, the entire run was booked. The company hurriedly added additional performances to accommodate local patrons. This customer demand is almost unheard of for a new work. A smart producer would mount *Cinderella* on Broadway. In addition to its comedic force, its score puts recent musicals to shame, whether from the Disney franchise or Andrew Lloyd Webber.

A large part of the public's advance response to *Cinderella* was the enduring fascination exerted by child prodigies. But another part was the desire for music that marshals harmony and melody to create beauty. Deutscher is, as usual, one step ahead of her critics. In a 2017 video made for the Carinthian Summer Music Festival in Austria, she again responded to the claims that she needs to "discover the complexity of the modern world" and that the point of music is to show that complexity. "Well, let me tell you a huge secret," she said. "I already know that the world is complex, and can be very ugly, but I think that these people have just got a little bit confused. If the world is so ugly, then what's the point of making it even uglier, with ugly music?"

It will be a fascinating test of music and of our culture to see what Deutscher is composing in fifteen years.

OPERAWire

THE HIGH AND LOW NOTES FROM AROUND THE INTERNATIONAL OPERA STAGE

In Review

Opera San Jose 2017-18 Review – Cinderella: 12-Year-Old Alma Deutscher Is a Genius To Behold

TOPICS: Alma Deutscher, Cinderella, San Jose Opera

Posted By: [Lois Silverstein](#) December 25, 2017

On a cold-for-northern California day, two days before Christmas, people streamed into the California Theater to attend the final performance of – “Cinderella” on Market Street in San Jose (a.k.a. Silicon Valley). Not “Cenerentola,” Rossini’s comic piece, but a work by a 12-year old composer, unveiling the debut for her second opera. Yes, on a similar heroine – a poor, misunderstood beggar girl, poorly treated, unloved, and family-less, until found and sought after by a Prince, on the eve of his accepting his crown. Opera San Jose and the Packard Humanities Institute brought the young Alma Deutscher’s first full production of the work to a sold-out house. From Basingstoke, England. That’s right.

Child Prodigy

Actually, the composition started when she was just about 10. Then, on an electric keyboard, she played the whole score, for her hospitalized Grandmother, since she would not live to hear it. As I sat there in the plush, restored movie palace, and watched the red curtain rise, and then listened to the lovely melodies, the enchanting harmonics and rich voices of a full cast and chorus, under the baton of Britain’s Musical Director and Conductor, Jane Glover, I realized we were being treated to a gift of a star indeed.

Alma Deutscher has been learning and making music since she played her first notes on the piano at two. At three, the violin. Soon after, she began improvising melodies on the piano. At four, she began composing, and an opera to boot. Of course, she has been dubbed another Mozart, and, we are all the better for it. In a time of doubt and suspicion, hate and war-mongering, to find a voice as original and as uplifting as Alma Deutscher’s, is more than a gift – it is hope. And the little child will lead them? Indeed. Alma’s original rendition of the classic fairy tale in music and song, is a chord to resound in our lives day after day. The variations in the story are more than mere variants: they are little stars themselves: a girl who has music that leaps into her head; a prince who doesn’t want political power but poetry; a group of people, alien and jealous and angry with each other, brought together by those very things. The stuff of dreams? Not in San Jose during this premiere week of Deutscher’s four-act “Cinderella.” It reminds, remands, renews joy in the theater, in music, in creativity, which we take out the door of the California Theater into the street, into the cars and buses, into our homes.

Bringing Together An Entire Universe

Of course, it is the phenomenon of Alma Deutscher herself we focus on first: the uniqueness of her gifts and her beaming and generous presence, shown us from the Overture and throughout the non-stop narrative and musical display to finale. Then, we are taken into the expressiveness of her violin, piano, and organ-playing, punctuating key points in the opera itself. Unobtrusive yet sparkling, her radiant music, her own soft singing, her commitment to the songs she created now projected through a cast of talented and vivacious singers throughout, soar many times in the opera.

Soprano Vanessa Becerra sings Cinderella with vivacious, ardent and luminous voice, coasting through the various musical moods the young composer has set for her with “elan” and great warmth. From her first tones, when she dispenses with the um pah-pah of the double-bass score for a more harmonious and intriguing melody, she shows us both as character and performer her musical range. The lovely melody sung in the birch forest by the unhappy Cinderella, she repeats throughout the opera, a leitmotiv for the creative heart and soul searching for her place in the world, one of Alma Deutscher’s own wishes in writing this music and some of her other works. It is, of course, Emeline, her fairy-godmother, played by contralto Claudia Chapa, whose round and sonorous voice, particularly in the middle register – she plays Azucena in other productions – who helps make this happen.

Solo arias, duets, trios, performed with ample mugging along with the flexible and sonorous soprano voices of the selfish, vain stepsisters, Griselda (Stacy Tappan) and Zibaldona (Karin Mushegin), keep the score flowing. Of course, the aging –diva stepmother, played and sung robustly and richly colored by soprano, Mary Dunleavy – in her scarlet dress and sinister machinations – more than furthers things along. A frequent Violetta and a Musetta, Stepmother Dunleavy keeps her household of scheming daughters in tow and the three play off each other with Brio, in the best musical opera/operetta/musical comedy style. Although there is real life, art, and love at stake in the opera, they romp and sing with convincing envy, selfishness, and desire in contrast to the sincere longing of their step-sister. It makes for more than just a lively and audience-friendly experience: we are actually transported, from the conventional tale into a milieu in which we do care how things work out. Yes, for all the familiarity of good-girl-makes good, prince-finds-rightful-happiness, from first act to finale, we move from watching and thinking that a 12-year old did this. And it is she that has brought all of these artists together to create something so special and emotional.

The music itself lifts us from the start, the expressive and winding strings, the haunting clarinet capturing the darkness and isolation of the young “beggar girl” in its melancholy, the resonance of the brass and basses when they support it. The Prince, Jonas Hacker, with his ringing and sincere expressive voice, with his Billy Elliot – look, convinces in his ardor and sincerity. A Mozartian tenor – for Don Ottavio he is a natural – he sings his heart out once he latches onto the open-hearted young girl, and whatever the obstacles, he is determined to keep her at his side.

The King, played by Bass-Baritone Nathan Stark, adds both comedy to his rich vocal display in the unfolding narrative. Along with his Minister, played with lively and piquant voice and manner by Brian Myer, the two vie for the fulfillment of their conventional values – heir, station, progeny in the kingdom, with romantic expression of the young couple. Aplomb and theatrical acumen by the two spices the romantic tale with feigned seriousness to delightful gaminess.

Continuity

One of the extraordinary aspects of the whole opera was the continuity. Almost never did it flag, for all its narrative familiarity. Both the music – from complete Overture – to final Chapel scene – never do we lose energy or pulse. Not only did Glover conduct with energy and sensitivity the forty-four piece orchestra, and Chorus, but with determination to give us

music that didn't wobble or shift so radically that we couldn't emotionally be absorbed by it. Strings and winds, with brass that pinpoints tense moments and garnishes the over-all lyricism and that make for a rich and various score. In the final scene, when Alma herself brings the organ in not only to amplify the marriage vows and harmony ensuing, the deep sonorities enrich both meaning and method. The charming flower girl, played by young Helen Deutscher, highlights this. Solidity, seriousness, and conviction surrender us to the possibility that art can unify and integrate fractures in our lives, if we let it. Indeed, the young composer invites us not to flee from these concerns, but to face them with renewed energy and trust.

Excellent costuming by Johann Stegmeir, sets with multiple layers of moving elements that smooth the shift of scenes from palace to opera house, from trap doors to forest, to chapel, designed by Steven Kemp, and colored by Lighting and Projection Designer David Lee Cuthbert, were all gracefully staged by Brad Dalton. Scene within scene– trap doors, dancers at a masked ball, and the full musical panoply compel us again to mumble – 12-years-old? And I, what was I doing? Playing Hide and Seek when this girl was dreaming up whole operas? But, we come back, and to a satisfying nearly three-hour artistic experience – music to fill heart and soul by – to embrace the world itself rather than merely virtual ones and look for renewed possibilities on how it might again be.

Thank you, dear Alma, for your art.



News

Medici To Stream Alma Deutscher's Opera 'Cinderella'



High Notes, On This Day

On This Day: How Rossini's 'La Cenerentola' Differs With Disney's Iconic 'Cinderella' Adaptations

Alma Deutscher

Wunder gibt es immer wieder

Die Renaissance des deutschen Singspiels



Die junge Komponistin wirkte auf der Bühne selbst mit. Hier begleitet sie ihre Cinderella, Theresa Krügl, auf der Violine

Mozart, Schubert und Tschaikowski sind ihre Lieblingskomponisten, das hört man, auch wenn der sphärische Beginn von Alma Deutschers »Cinderella« gleichermaßen an die ersten Takte des Strauss'schen Donauwalzers wie an die Wogen in Wagners »Rheingold« denken lässt. Was folgt, ist gleichsam die Wiederbelebung des deutschen Singspiels, eine melodienreiche Nummernoper, die stark von der Wiener Klassik geprägt ist und deren feine Orchestrierung von gesprochenen Dialogen zusammengehalten wird. Diese musikalischen Referenzen sollen den hohen Grad der Verblüffung, die den Autor während der

Wiener Uraufführung im schmucken Casino Baumgarten ereilt hat, nicht kaschieren, im Gegenteil: Die Komponistin, die während der Vorstellung überdies Geige spielt, am Klavier begleitet und einmal kurz als Sängerin auf die Bühne springt, ist mit ihren gerade einmal elf Lebensjahren zweifellos ein Wunder.

Ihre Aschenputtel-Version spielt in einem Opernhaus. Die böse Schwiegermutter, eine gealterte Operndiva, ist die Intendantin und ihre beiden Töchter phantasielose Mächtigen-Epigonen. Das arme Aschenputtel hingegen muss im Keller Noten kopieren, dabei wäre sie doch eine



Cinderella und die bösen Stiefschwestern Zibaldona (Katrin Koch) und Griselda (Anna Voshege)

begnadete Komponistin! Der Prinz wiederum ist ein verträumter Poet, der nach einer Seelenverwandten sucht, und diese in Aschenputtel im Zuge eines Gesangswettbewerbs findet, den der König im Rahmen eines Maskenballs für seinen Sohn organisiert. Hier lässt Richard Wagner, zumindest thematisch, nochmals grüßen, diesmal mit seinen »Meistersingern«.

Es beruhigt, dass Alma Deutscher von ihren Eltern offenbar mit der allergrößten Behutsamkeit gefördert wird. Das Wunderkind, das sich in England und in Israel bereits einen beachtlichen Bekanntheitsgrad verschafft hat, hätte mit »Cinderella« vermutlich eine große Halle füllen können, wenn es ihr Management darauf angelegt hätte. Stattdessen wurde die Uraufführung dem kleinen, freien Opernensemble Oh!pera unter der Leitung der Wiener Sopranistin Cathrin Chytil anvertraut. Es arbeitet mit jungen Musikern, häufig frisch von der Uni, und die machen ihre Sache überaus gut. Das kleine Orchester unter Vincius Kattah klingt erstklassig, und auch gesanglich passt das Niveau. Vor allem der weibliche Teil der Sängersolisten ließ aufhorchen: Catarina Coresi als sonore Stiefmutter, auch Anna Voshege und Karin Koch waren gesanglich durchschlagskräftig wie darstellerisch köstlich. Die schüchterne Schönheit der Titelrolle vermochte Theresa Krügl stimmlich wunderbar widerzuspiegeln. Inszeniert wurde mit viel Verve und bunten, historisierenden Kostümen (Regie: Dominik Am Zehnhoff-Söns), mit Bühnenbildern, die im Hintergrund in der Form von Fotografien und Videos auf eine Leinwand geworfen wurden.

Bald war klar: Deutschers »Cinderella« ist weit mehr als eine Kinderoper. Gefällig und zugleich von hoher musikalischer Qualität ist es vermutlich kein Werk, das nach der Uraufführung in der Versenkung verschwinden wird.

Am Ende der Oper drängt sich ein furioses Thema ins Gehör, das als Ohrwurm noch lange nachwirkt. Es dient dem Triumvirat aus Stiefmutter und Töchter als Ventil, nachdem es seine Niederlage als unabwendbar erkannt hat. Man vermeint es zu kennen. Tatsächlich handelt es sich um ein Nebenmotiv aus Mozarts »Kleiner Nachtmusik«. Es ist durchaus möglich, dass der jungen Komponistin dieser Umstand während ihrer Arbeit gar nicht bewusst war. Ihr fliegen die Melodien zu, sagt sie, in allen Lebenslagen. Gut möglich dass dann vermeintlich neue Melodien in Wahrheit recycelt werden. Aber erging es Mozart nicht ähnlich? Der vielstrapazierte Vergleich mit dem größten Genie der Musikgeschichte ist freilich gewagt, gewisse Parallelen sind aber nicht von der Hand zu weisen. Vor bald 350 Jahren wurde sein frühes Singspiel »Bastien und Bastienne« in Salzburg uraufgeführt – er war damals ungefähr gleich alt wie Deutscher. Wie wird sich Alma Deutschers Werdegang mit zunehmender Hör- und Lebenserfahrung entwickeln? Man wird sich den Namen dieser außergewöhnlichen Künstlerin merken müssen.

Die nächste Produktion von Oh!pera – Verdis »Il trovatore« – wird im September 2017 in Völkermarkt (Kärnten) ihre Premiere haben. www.ohpera.at

Stephan Burianek

Fotos Rolf Bock

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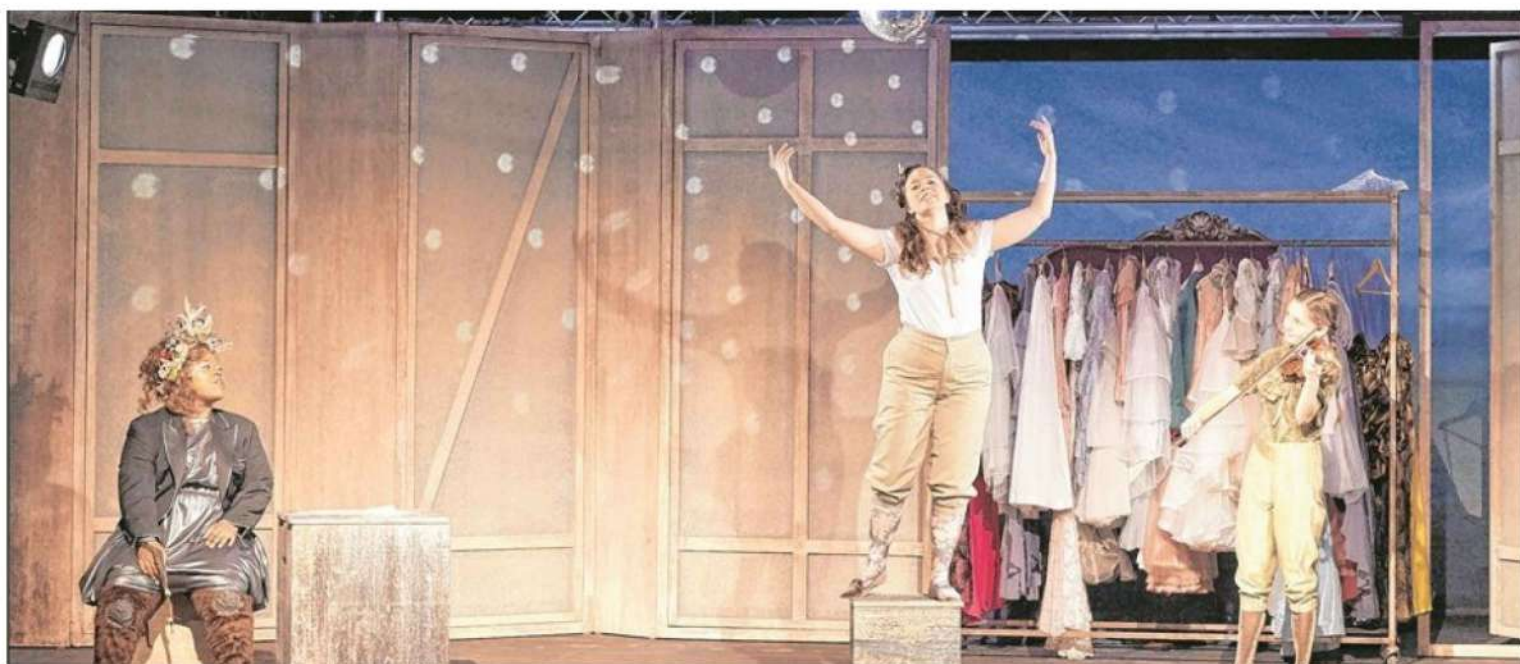
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OPERNKRITIK

Ein Himmel voller Zauberflöten

Die Kinderoper "Cinderella" der zwölfjährigen Alma Deutscher, zu sehen in der Walfischgasse.

vom 28.01.2018, 16:40 Uhr | Update: 28.01.2018, 18:46 Uhr



Träumt vom Glück: Bryony Dwyer (M.) als Cinderella, rechts Alma Deutscher an der Solo-Geige.
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C Christoph Irrgeher

Mehr zu diesem Thema



Am Wiedersehen sterben
21.06.2023 4



"Götterdämmerung": Ein Klangereignis
19.06.2023 11

Auch wenn es von außen nach klaren Machtverhältnissen aussah: Die Verhandlungen zwischen Dominique Meyer, Direktor der Wiener Staatsoper, und der zwölfjährigen Alma Deutscher dürften nicht einfach gewesen sein. Das Mädchen aus England hat immerhin etwas geschaffen, was Meyer unbedingt wollte, nämlich eine Oper namens "Cinderella". Sein Haus, so Meyers Vorschlag, würde das Stück auf der Studiobühne zeigen - wenn sich Deutscher bereit erklärte, ihr bisher abendfüllendes Werk auf eine Länge von einer Stunde zu kürzen. Mehr als 60 Minuten seien einem jungen Opernpublikum nämlich nicht zuzumuten. Das sah Deutscher angeblich anders, machte sich aber doch an den schmerzvollen Kürzungsprozess. Das Ergebnis ist nun seit Sonntagmittag auf der Studiobühne Walfischgasse zu begutachten - wobei ins Auge fällt, dass sich der Direktor nicht ganz durchgesetzt hat: "Cinderella" dauert jetzt 75 Minuten.

Diese Opernminuten klingen aber ganz fantastisch. Bereits im Jahr 2016 ist Deutschers "Cinderella" in Wien zu Gast gewesen, damals in voller Länge im Casino Baumgarten: Die Kritiker streuten dem Wunderkind damals Rosen, äußerten aber auch leichte Vorbehalte gegenüber Längen.

Mozart-Tonfall

Diese sind der Neufassung fremd. In geballter Form veranstaltet Deutscher ein Feuerwerk ihrer besten Ohrwürmer, und die Zwölfjährige ist eine Melodikerin von hohen Gnaden. Ihre Kantilenen sind sangbar und schlicht im Tonfall von Mozarts "Zauberflöte", transportieren je nach Bedarf bodenlose Trauer oder überströmende Sehnsucht. Dass Deutscher nur selten aus der Tonart einer Arie ausbricht und in ihren modernsten Momenten nach Tschaikowski klingt, tut der Bühnentauglichkeit keinen Abbruch. Begleitet von einem versierten Orchesterersatz, glänzt diese "Cinderella" nicht zuletzt durch eine wirkungsvolle Abfolge von Arien, Duetten, Ensembles und Sprechszenen.

Auch die Handlung entfaltet ihren Reiz, denn sie ist in die Welt einer Kinderkomponistin versetzt: Diese Cinderella muss nicht für ihre böse Verwandtschaft Asche fegen, sondern nachts Orchesterstimmen kopieren, denn die Stiefmutter befiehlt ein Opernhaus. Auch jenes Souvenir, das Aschenputtel dem Prinzen auf dem Ball zurücklässt, stammt aus der Welt der Musik: Es ist eine Melodie, die der Prinz sofort wieder zur Hälfte vergisst. So sucht er im ganzen Land nach der alleinigen Kennerin dieses Lieds. Die Staatsoper, darf man resümieren, hat gut daran getan, sich diese "Cinderella" zu sichern. Denn sie ist nicht einfach eine Attraktion für die dubiose Wunderkinder-Manege, sondern per se eine gute Oper.

Ob sich damit ein junges Publikum begeistern lässt, steht aber auf einem anderen Blatt, denn die Premiere hat ein Problem: Das Orchester (an der Rückwand des Kellersaals) klingt unter Dirigent Witolf Werner oft zu laut, als dass man die Sänger von der Bühne stets verstünde (jedenfalls wenn man weiter hinten sitzt) - und ohne eine akustische Anbindung an die Handlung fühlt sich gerade ein junges Publikum rasch gelangweilt. So ist mancher Erwachsene dann leider auch damit befasst, den Souffleur und Animateur für seine Begleitkinder zu geben.

Was auch diese erfreut, sind freilich die kleinen Slapstickgags von Regisseurin Birgit Kajtna und die buntscheckigen Kostüme von Janina Müller-Höreth. Schöne Stimmen kommen (soweit hörbar) von Pavel Kolgatin, einem Prinz mit Tamino-Timbre, und Bryony Dwyer als Cinderella, rollenbedingt schrill wiederum tönt die Stiefverwandtschaft unter Führung von Simina Ivan. Zuletzt viel Beifall, vor allem für Deutscher selbst.

Alma Deutscher began composing her opera *Cinderella* in 2014 at age nine, though many of the melodies originated even earlier. Over the following eight years, she gradually revised and expanded the work. Her adaptation of the traditional fairy tale revolves around music and takes place in the fantasy land of her childhood: Transylvanian. Cinderella is a young composer, envied and bullied by her stepfamily, and forced to work as a copyist by her stepmother, the manager of a small opera house. The Prince is a poet, and in the end, Cinderella and the Prince will find each other like lyrics find a tune. The libretto was conceived by Alma Deutscher and written with help from Elisabeth Adlington, Theresita Colloredo, Guy Deutscher, Tsur Ehrlich, Norbert Hummelt, Eitana Medan-Moshe, Meredith Oakes, David Packard, Janie Steen.

Characters

Cinderella – Soprano
Griselda (Step-sister) – Soprano
Zibaldona (Step-sister) – Mezzo-Soprano
Stepmother – Soprano
Prince Theodore – Tenor
King Fridolph of Transylvanian – Bass
Fairy – Alto
Royal Minister – Speaking Role
Elves – Children’s Chorus
Ball Guests and Church Chorus – Opera Chorus

Synopsis

Overture (This text is projected on the screen:) Once upon a time, in the Kingdom of Transylvanian – not to be confused with Transylvania – there lived a girl called Cinderella. Her mother died when she was young, and she was brought up by her loving father, the manager of the small opera house at the edge of the capital Brasslichmai. The father later married again, an ageing prima donna with two daughters of her own, Griselda and Zibaldona. When Cinderella’s father died, Cinderella’s Stepmother took over the running of the opera company, and everything changed...

Act I Cinderella has been up all night at her Stepmother’s behest, copying parts for the orchestra rehearsal. A beautiful melody springs into her head, and she starts singing it. Her stepmother is furious that she hasn’t finished copying the double bass part and sends her to the forest to fetch firewood. Meanwhile, Prince Theodore would much rather write poems than prepare for his duties as future King. But the King is becoming impatient for the Prince to marry and produce an heir. To find a suitable bride, a royal Ball is organized, which will also comprise a singing competition. The Prince escapes to the forest, where he meets a Fairy disguised as an old woman. He takes pity on her when he sees she is cold, and now that he feels his poems are of no more use to anyone, he gives her his book of poems so she can use it to light a fire. Soon afterwards Cinderella also meets the Fairy, still disguised. Cinderella takes off her own shoes and gives them to the barefoot old woman, who thanks her and gives her the Prince’s book of poems in return.

At the opera house, the Royal Minister mistakenly gives the Stepmother the King's prescription instead of an invitation to the Ball. Zibaldona and Griselda conclude that the strange "invitation" is in fact one of the Prince's poems, and they try to compose melodies for the 'poem', to perform at the singing competition during the Ball. Cinderella, however, is more inspired by the book of poems she was given in the forest, and she composes a beautiful song to one of the poems. She falls asleep as she writes it down. Her stepmother finds Cinderella's composition and steals it. Cinderella is not allowed to go to the Ball, because there is no suitable dress for her.

Act II As her stepsisters are getting ready for the Ball, Cinderella shows up in a dress that she has sewn together from old, discarded opera costumes. Her stepsisters tear the dress off her and her mother tells her that she can't go with them to the Ball because "no one wants a beggar girl!" The mother and sisters depart. Cinderella, distraught, sings a haunting Ballad about a beggar girl who freezes to death as she searches for someone to love her. The Fairy arrives to return the borrowed shoes and conjures up a new gown for Cinderella. Cinderella can now attend the Ball, but the Fairy tells her that she must be back by midnight.

Act III The royal masked Ball is in full swing as the Prince makes his entrance, wearing a mask and humble clothes. None of the women recognise him and Zibaldona and Griselda rudely reject him. After a while, Cinderella appears at the Ball and begins to dance with the modest young man who was rejected by all other girls. The singing competition starts with Griselda's song. Cinderella recognizes her own melody, but the lyrics are all wrong. Upset, she runs away to the balcony. Prince Theodore follows and she eventually sings to him her song with the right words, without knowing that he is the poet. The Prince is greatly surprised to hear his own verses sung to such a beautiful melody. He reveals his identity. Cinderella is shocked and flees from the Ball as the clock strikes midnight, while singing a line from her Ballad about the beggar girl.

Act IV The Prince is desperate to find the mysterious girl from the Ball. He is haunted by the tune that she sang as she fled, and he decides to search for her through this tune: only she will know how it went on. At the opera house, Prince Theodore finds the two stepsisters, and asks them to continue the melody. Cinderella is locked away, but as the Prince leaves, he hears her voice singing the haunting tune from the basement. After struggling with the stepsisters, he manages to free her. They are married in the cathedral.



The beginning of Cinderella's Ballad, "When the day falls into darkness", from Alma's notebook. This is the haunting tune that Cinderella sings as she flees from the Ball, and through which the Prince eventually find her.