

OPERA REVIEWS

director Fabio Luisi, who took up the reins in 2018 with the goal of competing with La Scala, resigned last year in protest at political appointments made by the governing board. Productions are mounted on a shoestring, with Verdi's *Rigoletto*, *Trovatore* and *Traviata* using the same sets, for example. Understandably, Denis Krief deployed the same strategy for his *Trittico* last November, but it will take more than prudent financing to restore the company's fortunes.

A picture postcard of the Seine acts as a backdrop. Michele's barge is represented by a long wooden platform littered with a few crates, with steps below deck for the stevedores to emerge with sacks of cargo. There's little space for the song-seller to peddle his wares to the passing girls, who all trundle off in exactly the same direction as they entered. It's not just that it looks budget, but it lacks the sense of claustrophobia and grime essential for the opera to work effectively. After Michele murders Luigi – a completely tame bit of direction here – the lighting (also by Krief) drops far too suddenly as Giorgetta comes out on deck.

Musically, things are much stronger. The singers give good, honest performances, even if their acting can be stilted, and Valerio Galli gets persuasive results from the Maggio orchestra. Franco Vassallo is a solid, brooding Michele, 'Nulla! Silenzio!' – Puccini's best baritone aria – dispatched with passion and a fiery top G. Maria José Siri's dark *spinto* makes her perfect for Puccini's soprano roles (I saw her fine Cio-Cio-San at La Scala), and, apart from an occasional squally moment, she's an intense Giorgetta. Best of all is Angelo Villari as Luigi, whose steely tenor gleams with testosterone.

At just 50 minutes, this DVD/Blu-ray is exceedingly short measure. For just a few quid extra, you can purchase the entire *Trittico* in Richard Jones's outstanding Royal Opera production on Opus Arte. To rub salt into the wound, the *Gianni Schicchi* from this Maggio Musicale staging was released separately in August (another £20), and *Suor Angelica* followed in September (these will be reviewed in the next issue). That's £60 for a single evening's triple bill. Surely even Dante's old swindler Schicchi wouldn't be quite as audacious? **Mark Pullinger**

Saint-Saëns



Le timbre d'argent

Hélène Guilmette *sop*Hélène
Jodie Devos *sop*Rosa
Edgaras Montvidas *ten*Conrad
Yu Shao *ten*Bénédict

Tassis Christoyannis *bar*.....Spiridion
Jean-Yves Ravoux *ten*.....Patrick
Matthieu Chapuis *ten*.....Un Mendiant
Accentus; Les Siècles / François-Xavier Roth
Bru Zane © ② BZ1041 (153' • DDD)
 Includes synopsis, libretto and translation



'It's not an opera any more, it's a nightmare', Saint-Saëns wrote in 1880, when faced with a request for a potential sixth version

of *Le timbre d'argent* ('The Silver Bell') for a production in St Petersburg, which, as on so many occasions in the work's dreadful history, was eventually abandoned. Saint-Saëns's first opera, it was commissioned in 1864 as an *opéra comique* for Léon Carvalho's Théâtre Lyrique, then withdrawn during rehearsals due to lack of funds. It was subsequently rewritten with recitatives for the Opéra (which got cold feet), then again with dialogue for the Opéra-Comique (who backtracked when the Franco-Prussian war broke out) before eventually reaching the stage at the Théâtre de la Gaîté in Paris in 1877. There were umpteen more revisions before Saint-Saëns produced his final version for Brussels in 1914, which forms the basis for this wonderful recording, with the cast and forces of a 2017 revival at the Opéra-Comique.

The libretto is by Jules Barbier and Michel Carré, who also provided Gounod with *Faust* and Offenbach with *Les contes d'Hoffmann*, and there are echoes in *Le timbre d'argent* of both. Saint-Saëns's protagonist is Conrad, a disaffected Austrian artist, suffering with a psychosomatic illness triggered by a conflict between love for his saintly fiancée Hélène and his obsessive desire for the ballerina-cum-courtesan Fiametta (played by a dancer), the subject of his latest painting. Pursuit of Fiametta requires money, however, and in order to acquire it, Conrad soon falls foul of the sinister doctor Spiridion, who gives him a magic bell, which fills his coffers each time Conrad rings it, but always does so at the price of the life of someone close to him. As the death toll mounts, Spiridion, like Lindorf in *Hoffmann*, also stalks him in multiple incarnations as a succession of potential rivals for Fiametta's attentions, until a closing redemptive twist reveals the whole narrative to be the product of Conrad's feverish imagination.

There are some dramaturgical wobbles and the score is uneven, though the best of it is magnificent. Carvalho's insistence on a

leading soprano role to counter Fiametta's silent presence results in Hélène acquiring a musical prominence that the narrative doesn't quite support. The third of the opera's four acts is predominantly pastoral and seems anticlimactic after the second, where the diablerie is marvellous and Spiridion, in his marquis guise, at his beguiling best. A handful of Wagnerisms are sprinkled in among the Gallic elegance and wit of the rest of it: *Tannhäuser* was clearly on Saint-Saëns's mind, and some of Fiametta's music has strayed from the Venusberg.

The recording itself is tremendous, conducted with infectious energy by François-Xavier Roth, and with Les Siècles really relishing every shift of colour in Saint-Saëns's gorgeous orchestral palette. Edgaras Montvidas is a fine, empathetic Conrad, his dark tone and passionate delivery nicely contrasted with Yu Shao's greater refinement as the solicitous Bénédict. Hélène Guilmette does lovely things as Hélène – her Act 2 aria is particularly exquisite – while Jodie Devos, with her silvery tone, makes much of little in the ungrateful role of Rosa, Hélène's sister and Bénédict's fiancée. The great performance, though, comes from Tassis Christoyannis as Spiridion, beautifully voiced, seductive yet witty in his various disguises, attractive and sinister throughout. There's fine choral singing from Accentus, while the recording itself, the occasional moment of woodwind key clatter apart, is ideally spacious. It's immensely enjoyable, and one of Bru Zane's finest achievements to date.

Tim Ashley

Vinci

Gismondo re di Polonia

Max Emanuel Cencic *counterten*Gismondo
Yuriy Mynenko *counterten*Otone
Sophie Junker *sop*Cunegonda
Aleksandra Kubas-Kruk *sop*Primislao
Jake Arditti *counterten*Ernesto
Dilyara Idrisova *sop*Giuditta
Nicholas Tamagna *counterten*Ermano
(oh!) Orkiestra Historyczna / Martyna Pastuszka, Marcin Świątkiewicz *hpd*
Parnassus Arts © ③ 912010 487001 (3h 38' • DDD)
 Includes synopsis, libretto and translation



Gismondo re di Polonia (Rome, 1727) depicts an entirely fictitious

title-hero's multiple acts of clemency towards the rebellious Lithuanian duke Primislao. The libretto was dedicated to