

An eager diva, a dreamy Mimi

Alan Frost experiences intense colour.

When small, my younger son referred to what he called 'the black and white days'. He assumed that before the advent of colour television we saw and acted out our lives in monochrome. It was an interesting notion and perhaps not as surreal as first appears, because for anyone born at the end of the second world war in London grey was the prevailing colour of school uniform, cooked cabbage, and teenage films. In an essay in the programme for the Royal Opera's *Il Turco in Italia* Adrian Mourby writes of this period: 'Britain was one vast suburb where the shops closed at five, the telephone was out in the hall, the hall was cold and streets were completely deserted on Sundays.' He refers to the films of the period of our youth such as *A Kind of Loving* (1962), *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* (1960), *The Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner* (1962), *Room at the Top* (1959), and *This Sporting Life* (1963), all of which added to the greyness of the times. In fact, it is a wonder that my generation did not emerge from the early 60s with clinical depression.

What saved us was the Fellini fantasy that had caught our imaginations at the end of the feckless 50s and *La Dolce Vita* (1960) is the inspiration for the production of Rossini's opera at Covent Garden. The film, although in black and white, buzzed with heat, colour, and glamour and so the stage is brilliantly lit with a vibrant Technicolor set and a heroine to match the busty idols of Italian cinema. I now realise that I have been unfair to Cecilia Bartoli in suggesting that the audience's excitement at her singing was matched only by her own and in implying that on stage she is only ever herself and never the character. I learn from musicologist Emanuele Senici, another essayist in the programme, that some modern commentators advance the hypothesis: 'Rossini characters always wear masks... constantly aware that they are operatic characters, rather than real human beings... (they) have no past... no future... no anticipation of who they may become... The only reality (is) operatic... the subject of Rossini's operas is comic opera itself.' This meta-theatrical insight explains all. I cannot criticise the most technically perfect colouratura mezzo of our times for not being in character – there is none in Rossini. We are there to celebrate *opera buffa*, observe Miss

Bartoli's extraordinary articulation, her gift for acting and comedy, her enthusiasm for Rossini, and love for music. This was an evening to lift the spirits and wash away drab thoughts. Viva Cecilia – the patron saint of music!

Bohemian rhapsody

Whereas, a few weeks later, as Mimi entered Rodolfo's garret, there was no question that this was an old friend. Three hours later, as she died in a chilling, eye-filling, chin-quivering moment of pathos, I was ready to ask where the funeral would be. This was acting and singing of the highest order and it should have been no surprise to discover that it was not Mimi but Angela Gheorghiu accompanied by Rolando Villazón and a convincing group of bohemians. *La Bohème's* 1974 production at the Royal Opera always pleases but it has never served its cast better than this night. It's over a decade since I first saw her sing Mimi but Miss Gheorghiu now looks younger than ever and the voice is still perfection.

Cuban torpor

Are you overexcited? Do you like watching surf roll and paint dry? Then waft along to the Cottesloe and see *President of an Empty Room*, a new play by Stephen Knight. Set in a Cuban cigar factory, there is no chance that you will reach the edge of your seat. Enjoy exuberant ennui, daydream to your heart's delight, relish this tormenting trifle, and I dare you to stay for the second act. What happens? Who cares? This is the perfect tranquiliser.

Macedonian delight

If you can say his name and forgive him having one beginning with four consonants, plan for some future piano recitals of exceptional quality with Simon Trpceski, the young Macedonian virtuoso. I heard him deep in Dorset in the ballroom of what was once a mental hospital, but no straitjackets were required to pin us to our chairs as he ran the gamut of emotions in a demanding programme of Chopin and Rachmaninov. After hearing his rendition of Rachmaninov's Prelude in B flat major, opus 23/2, I questioned my own sanity – did he really just play that? He will leave you gasping, stupefied, incredulous, and beholden. Find him and enjoy.