

## Thanks for the mammary

Alan Frost gets hot.

You may well find my headline wilfully lubricious but I report only what I see. The fact is that the Duke of Mantua delivered his opening ditty, *Questa o quella*, poised between the breasts of two topless actresses in an orgy scene of great realism. Nor did it end there. In the last act of *Rigoletto* he was required to wipe and lap wine from Maddalena's extensive décolletage. Last month I commented on Rolando Villazón's acting abilities and one can only surmise the relish with which he must have anticipated the (un)dress rehearsal. As Maddalena, Viktoria Vizin made an attractive and perfect foil to the Duke's philandering. There was no avoiding the corruption of his soul nor, initially, of Rigoletto's willingness to play the pander for his master. There were also no doubts that this was a seedy night in Covent Garden's red light district and we should have been wearing grubby macs.

The surprise for me was Dmitri Hvorostovsky, who was winner of the Cardiff Singer of the World competition in the same year, 1989, that Bryn Terfel won the *lieder* prize. I have seen Hvorostovsky several times on stage and there is no doubt of the mellifluousness of his voice, but I have been unconvinced by his stage presence. He sang only three performances in this run at the Royal Opera (as did the other principals) but on his final night I was transfixed. His hunchback transformed him into a true monster providing fodder for Mantua's vengery. Such was his characterisation that, perversely, the Siberian's golden baritone oozed malevolence until, of course, the scenes with his daughter when love spilled from his twisted body. Ekaterina Siurina, as Gilda, was captivatingly virginal and her ultimate shame almost too painful to watch – death seemed a safe conclusion for one subject to such lechery and treachery. Add to the pot the Sparafucile of Eric Halfvarson, Edward Downes' energy as conductor, and I was able to leave the theatre very contented.

### What, no mud?

If it is July and raining then it must be the summer music festival season, but on a scorching, sunny evening in Gloucestershire I was introduced to Longborough Opera. Summer opera festivals vary from the repertory system of Glyndebourne to the summer school variety of Dorset Opera. Longborough lies midway between the two extremes and imports some productions, including *La Bohème* by an organisation called the Opera Project. It was a charm-

ing experience: black tie, picnics by cars on a vast field, an occasional tinkle of cut-glass goblets and accents, great views of the countryside, and that country house feel unique to England. (Is Garsington Opera not oppressed by the shades of Lady Ottoline Morrell, Lytton Strachey, and the whole Bloomsbury Group?) It was a competent, undemanding performance with a set involving railway lines that puzzled me all night. The bass chorus consisted of one man which is a slight handicap in the crowd scenes but good fun was had by all.

### Albert in a sweat

I had been under the impression that the Royal Albert Hall was refurbished, but at my first BBC Prom for five years it was as hot as ever inside despite a cool, late July breeze outside. At a reception beforehand a former politician mentioned the contrast between the annual salary of an orchestral musician and the weekly pay of a professional footballer – the former is considerably smaller. I might have pondered the economics of different leisure markets a little more had it not been for the fact that I believe this same man allegedly wore his favourite 'football strip' during the course of entertaining a former mistress and I found it hard to take him seriously.

My home orchestra, the Bournemouth Symphony Orchestra, had been asked to perform a curious programme beginning with the *Chairman Dances* by John Adams. I love this amusing piece and had heard it locally less than a year ago, but within the vast auditorium of the Albert Hall the sound was very distant. The UK première of John Corigliano's violin concerto, 'The Red Violin', showed off a very virtuosic Joshua Bell and there were moments of great beauty. The piece is clearly fiendishly difficult but the four movements lacked cohesion and although there is lyricism, as in 'Anna's theme', I suspect the opening *Chaconne* will survive longer by itself than will the whole concerto. I noticed the BBC team in its box watching the piece on their monitor and observing Bell's technique which may have been fascinating. From the back of the hall I felt very detached emotionally. Marin Alsop did a sterling job with excerpts from Prokofiev's *Romeo and Juliet*, but I can't wait for the opening concert of her new season – Mahler's 'Resurrection' Symphony in the more intimate surroundings of Lighthouse, Poole, the venue not blessed with a definite article.