

The Biedermeier test

The Neue Pinakothek in Munich is my kind of art gallery. There is a very clear route through the rooms which journeys through 19th-century paintings and sculptures in a logical progression from the English works of Gainsborough and Reynolds to the post-impressionists and Klimt. Every now and again there are gasps from patrons as they realize that a certain work, so familiar from outside coffee table books, is actually in Munich. Two names were emblazoned on my memory after a visit and, curiously, neither was a famous painter and one was fictional. The Neue Pinakothek was founded by King Ludwig I of Bavaria (born 1786, reigned 1825–1848, died 1868). As crown prince from 1799 to his accession he took a keen interest in contemporary art and the construction of the gallery was but one of the projects he completed when king. In a sense the exhibition is biographical as he is the subject of several paintings and there is no doubt that his legacy endures within the building which was destroyed during World War II and reopened in 1981. The museum and its founder are worth exploring. Fans of Wagner will have their own ideas about the legacy of his grandson, ('mad') King Ludwig II.

The character Gottfried Biedermeier was invented by the writer Adolf Kussmaul in 1853. Biedermeier was modelled on a real individual, a 'childlike, docile and simple-minded' teacher and poet but he stood for the typical German bourgeois of the period between the Congress of Vienna in 1815 and the March revolution of 1848. The name is now synonymous with the arts, furniture, and lifestyle of the period in German-speaking countries and Denmark at that time. In Great Britain today the style of furniture is well known but we are less familiar with the literature and art and the Neue Pinakothek shows works by George Wadlmüller and other artists. The style depicts ordinary middle-class life 'with a greater or lesser degree of sentimentality, but always unheroically and without political comment'. Thus the sharp barbs of 18th-century satirists and the lofty ideals of neo-classicists or the romantics are avoided. This is about people in their comfort zone; at home in as naturalistic an environment as possible. There is gentle humour, attention to



Neue Pinakothek, Munich

www.pinakothek.de



Hérodias

www.dorsetopera.com



The Tempest

www.rsc.org.uk



King John

Alan Frost does the rounds from Munich to Stratford via Dorset.

detail, and unpretentiousness. I confess I love the style. As the rooms in the gallery begin to exhibit works after 1860 the needling of the impressionists and modernists has its customary unsettling influence on me.

Massenet

I make comment on Dorset Opera's performances of Massenet's *Hérodias* rather diffidently because, as chairman of the company, I have a conflict of interest. Our director William Relton and set and costume designer Cordelia Chisholm set the action in 1950s Jerusalem which provoked acerbic criticism in some quarters. Conductor Peter Crockford dealt with the score magnificently but the orchestra will have to sharpen up its act for *Turandot* next year. Ros Plowright was tyrannical in the title role, Franco Pomponi suitably decadent as her husband Hérode, Ian Storey a lively Jean, and Christine Arand a charming Salomé. This is not the Salomé of Wilde and Strauss but a young girl infatuated with the ideals of Jean, not just his body! You will hard-pressed to find a CD of this glorious music. It's a neglected masterpiece.

Shakespeare

The Tempest in the RSC's latest production is definitely not in the Biedermeier mould. This is a wintry, Brechtian interpretation set on Arctic tundra that left me cold, literally, and I did not return to the theatre after the interval. The RSC's forthcoming London season includes this play along with two others. In hotel terminology my ratings are ***** for *Much Ado about Nothing*; *** for *Antony and Cleopatra*; and * for *The Tempest*. In an earlier article I extolled the sparkling performances of Tamsin Greig and Joseph Millson in the former; Patrick Stewart and Harriet Walter are rather world-weary and just do not have enough sexual chemistry in the second; and Patrick Stewart's Prospero is not well served by the surroundings in *The Tempest*. But these are my Biedermeier ratings – not necessarily yours!

Millson stars in the latest *King John* at Stratford with Richard McCabe in the title role and it's riveting. Millson's Faulconbridge is one of those magnetic interpretations that suggests that this young actor is destined for great heights. See him soon if you can.