



In Review (<http://www.operanews.org/operanews/templates/review.aspx?date=5/1/2010>) > International

Ariadne auf Naxos

STRASBOURG

Opéra National du Rhin

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Slapstick humor: Libor and Novikova (on platform) and friends in Strasbourg's *Ariadne*
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Opéra National du Rhin's new production of *Ariadne auf Naxos* was notable for the casting of German soprano Christiane Libor in the title role. Libor made a spectacular Paris debut last season as Ada in Wagner's *Die Feen*, whetting the appetite of local opera fans for her appearance as Strauss's heroine. On February 7 — the first night of the production, staged by André Engel, designed by Nicky Rieti, and with Daniel Klajner conducting the Mulhouse Orchestre Symphonique — Libor did not disappoint her audience, filling the long phrases of her first monologue with refulgent tone and rising to a thrilling top that promises a major Wagnerian career. Dramatically the soprano still needs to work

on her movement and find ultimate Straussian eloquence, but the ease and security of her voice were never in question. She was not helped by Engel's flat production, which set the prologue in a basement room of a villa in the 1950s, where pots of paint and re-plastering activities were added frustrations to the composer's rehearsal.

Despite the clear plotting, there is more humor and poetry to be found in the Ariadne Prologue than Engel suggested. The sex of the Major-domo was changed: in the hands of Ruth Orthmann, she became a fearsome event manageress. Werner Van Mechelen's cynically practical Music Master made his points clearly. Although the Composer of Angélique Noldus was ideally androgynous, and she phrased her music stylishly, the mezzo could not disguise the fact that the role took her clear, light voice out of its comfort zone. The Dancing Master of veteran tenor Guy de Mey was here a smooth lounge lizard, and young baritone Olivier Déjean made the most of his appearance as the taciturn Lackey.

After the interval, the patron of the arts, his wife and their two children entered to watch the entertainment opposite the Composer's piano, with the stage dominated by Rieti's purposely kitschy mountain. A nice touch of Marx Brothers slapstick humor — a vein that Engel could have tapped further — from the energetic commedia dell'arte troop brought a welcome smile. The Harlekin of baritone Thomas Olimans was sturdily sung but lacked the charm of Julia Novikova's delightfully sexy Zerbinetta. Novikova had all the technique necessary for her big aria, but her German remained almost willfully obscure, robbing the role of its piquancy. After sighs of frustration from the Composer and bewildered shock from the patron and his family, Ariadne and Bacchus were left alone for their final duet. Tenor Michael Putsch made a stentorian contribution to the performance, his muscular Bacchus matching Libor decibel for decibel, but despite fine intonation, the relentless heroism became tiring for tenor and audience alike.

It was at this moment that Klajner's conducting seemed at its least imaginative. His overheated approach to the work took the opera a long way from its chamber origins as an intermezzo to Molière's *Le Bourgeois Gentilhomme*. More seriously, ensemble was patchy throughout the evening, and the Mulhouse orchestra sounded overtaxed. The lack of transparent textures and poetic delicacy made the extended final duet more of a vocal sparring match than a celestial affirmation of love. □

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