

prove that the most local of settings can still convey universal truths, Lo's approach found space for an afterlife where a Dutch girl and an Albanian boy could converse in Cantonese and sing in English and still seem utterly plausible.

KEN SMITH

CZECH REPUBLIC

Ostrava

Now in its centenary season (a milestone to be celebrated with a gala next month), the NATIONAL MORAVIAN-SILESIAN THEATRE boasts a distinguished tradition. For the last decade it has been under the general directorship of the stage director Jiří Nekvasil, whose fingerprint is clear in both the adventurous programming and the performance levels—qualities that came together illuminatingly in the house's recent new production of Martinů's *Julietta* (seen on January 19). It's a rare privilege to witness a staging quite so in harmony with a work as this one, a production balanced delicately over that place where reality ends and illusion begins; in other words, it was a perfect match for Martinů's dream-web of sound, a score that attains its own trance-like quality and in which the musical ground is constantly shifting thanks to those recurring 'Julietta chords', a distinctively altered and enriched plagal cadence punctuating the music. A gift to directors—*Julietta* is the story of a dream in which the hapless bookseller anti-hero Michel pursues his ideal woman and chooses to remain in the dream rather than return to the real world—the opera cannot be staged without recourse to layers of surrealism and symbolism. Yet critically, this staging never drifted too far into surrealism, because the work (based on George Neveux's play *Juliette, ou La Clé des songes*) is also rooted in a very real situation: as well as exploring the role that memory plays in human existence, its Kafkaesque plot speaks of the homelessness of a composer whose native Czechoslovakia was trampled over soon after its 1938 premiere.

Directed by the genre-mixing duo known as SKUTR (Martin Kukučka and Lukáš Trpišovský), this *Julietta* was poetic and painterly, full of symbols coming to life. Martin Chocholoušek's striking white-toned sets were rich in realistic detail that almost lulled one into seeing things that maybe weren't there—for example, the railway station hall in Act 1 seemed to make sense of (or further confuse) the references to the railway (or lack thereof) in the libretto. Simona Rybáková's costumes used colour to express the strange atmosphere of the opera, and many characters were dressed contemporarily, though some of the women's dresses were grimy with the passage of time. A grand piano, turned on its side with its legs removed, was dragged on and off as cued by the score—the piano is a special sonority in the score and Julietta's initial appearance in Act 2, glimpsed through the instrument's translucent soundboard, confirmed how she is embodied in its sound. In a staging that told the story with as much clarity as possible, yet left one guessing, such things as the carrying around on a stretcher of Julietta's veil seemed to have many-layered meaning and left tantalizing question marks in the air. Intriguingly, in the Office of Dreams the Official was dressed identically to Michel, in the same pyjamas and overcoat. This was a production that didn't dictate any conclusion, and instead relished the ambiguities and incomprehensibility of it all.

Jakub Klecker, the theatre's music director, mined the score for its depths and drew an uncommonly warm orchestral performance. The playing had punchy muscularity and dramatic drive, yet the layers of sound came across with rare precision. The entire opera was strongly cast, beginning with an ideally matched leading pair in Doubravka Součková's Julietta and Jorge Garza's Michel. This Julietta was both a spectral figure and a real woman,



Jorge Garza as Michel and Doubravka Součková as Julietta in Martinů's opera in Ostrava

an ethereal fairy yet a free spirit full of temperament. Singing with a shimmering luminosity, she was hard to pin down (but then does she exist?). Garza disclosed a plangent tenor as Michel, a figure much put-upon during his fruitless search for his imagined real woman. Petr Leviček displayed a strong if darker and different tenor in his multiple roles as the Police Officer, Postman and so on, and proved a compelling actor too. Markéta Cukrová's warm-voiced Young Arab and Jiří Rajniš big-toned Old Arab and Seller of Memories also stood out, but indeed the entire cast, many playing multiple roles, showed themselves to be singing actors of a sophistication not found in many places and added their own layers to the 'opera of dreams' that is Martinů's masterpiece.

JOHN ALLISON

FRANCE

Caen

While the rest of the world was already gearing itself up during 2019 for the opening of the #Beethoven250 floodgates, France spent the year quietly marking the bicentenary of the birth of one of her own adopted sons, Jacques Offenbach. He offers rich pickings across his almost 100 operettas and *opéras comiques* for companies interested in rarities beyond the well-trodden paths of *Orphée* and *Hoffmann*. *Le Roi Carotte*, *Barbe-bleue*, *Maître Péronilla* and *Pomme d'api*, for example, have all been presented on major French stages during the year. Another, *Madame Favart*, a late *opéra comique* in three acts to a libretto by Alfred Duru and Henri Chivot, has been given new life in a co-production by the Opéra Comique, Opéra de Limoges and THÉÂTRE DE CAEN, where I caught up with it as an appropriately effervescent end-of-year entertainment (December 29).

The eponymous playwright-actress Justine and her playwright-manager husband Charles-Simon Favart were genuine figures of the 18th-century theatrical world, immortalized in the