

For his Teatro dell'Opera staging, Vick set *Zaide* on a building site, featuring workmen, scaffolding and pipework, and a cumbersome cement mixer. Sets and costumes were by Italo Grassi, lighting was by Giuseppe Di Iorio, and Ron Howell was movement director. Gatti's meticulous care with the instrumentation accompanying all the variants in the storyline was a joy to hear, and the audience certainly showed their appreciation of his conducting. A key central role in the production was played by the actor Remo Girone. It is he who explained, evoked and guided the action on stage, starting with his announcement that he had come across Mozart's manuscript by chance in a trunk. Heard on October 25, the cast was first-rate. As *Zaide*, Chen Reiss displayed remarkable energy and expressive intensity. There were memorable performances too from the light tenor Juan Francisco Gatell as Gomatz, the imposing bass Markus Werba as Allazim, a role that allowed him to show off his vast vocal range, and the tenor Paul Nilon as Soliman.

LUIGI BELLINGARDI

NEW ZEALAND

Auckland

NEW ZEALAND OPERA's production of *Le nozze di Figaro*, planned for last June and July in Auckland, Wellington and Christchurch, was rescheduled to 2021; Handel's *Semele*, scheduled for last September, was less seriously delayed, opening in late October in the Anglican CATHEDRAL OF THE HOLY TRINITY in Auckland.

I saw it on November 4 and understood why, with such a remarkable production in the wings, the director Thomas de Mallet Burgess and the company were determined to bring it to life as soon as coronavirus restrictions allowed. It proved a brilliant theatrical phenomenon, surprising, amusing and utterly engrossing.

To dispel any notion that *Semele* might have been a total revelation for its New Zealand audience, I must mention that I'd seen a fine student production by Victoria University School of Music in Wellington in 2009. And more remarkably, that in 2001 the music school had staged a production of the original setting of Congreve's libretto by John Eccles from about 1707 (interestingly, conducted by the music director of this Handel production, Peter Walls). Eccles's opera was never produced at the time; his *Semele* had its first production in 1964.

Handel's opening scene in the temple of Juno here became a fashionable wedding, with the formal invitation to attend the marriage of Semele and Athamas projected onto a huge screen and the wedding guests strolling down the aisle, taking selfies, conscious of their status and pretentiously recognizing friends and audience members. No stage effects were needed beyond the cathedral itself, which provided the perfect backdrop, all the leading singers meeting the drama's demands and investing the occasion with meaning. Later scenes—in the countryside, in Semele's mountaintop palace or in the Cave of Sleep—were vividly and entertainingly evoked, enhanced by Tracy Grant Lord's elegant costume designs and Jo Kilgour's sensitive, atmospheric lighting.

The production may have been unorthodox (Jupiter made an appearance on a motorbike) but the musical approach was rigorous, Walls directing a Baroque ensemble including natural horns and trumpets, and a well-rehearsed chorus.



Emma Pearson as Semele and Paul Whelan as Cadmus in New Zealand Opera's production at Auckland Cathedral

Each individual performance made a striking theatrical impact. Sashe Angelovski as the Priest revealed an opulent bass voice, the male alto Stephen Diaz sang with refinement as the jilted Athamas and Paul Whelan lent his distinguished baritone and imposing stature to the roles of Cadmus and Somnus, singing a moving 'Leave me loathsome light' in Act 3. The sheer beauty and virtuosity of Emma Pearson's singing as Semele properly dominated, not only through

vocal quality but also in her witty portrayal of self-awareness, her indifference to her impending wedding enlivening the performance from the beginning. Jupiter intervened before the wedding could take place, opulently sung by the tenor Amitai Pati (one of the popular Samoan trio Sol3 Mio); lascivious and arrogant, he swept Semele away in a moment of carefree mutual lust. She expressed that gloriously in 'Endless pleasure, endless love' and in a droll 'Myself I shall adore', and he sang beautifully in 'Where'er you walk'. Semele's sister Ino was sung by the mezzo Sarah Castle, her voice never failing to carry, doubling as Juno in a lively interpretation of a role comparable to Fricka's in *Die Walküre*. Castle and Chelsea Dolman as Iris sang the scene on Mount Cithaeron from galleries next to the organ pipes high up on either side of the sanctuary, ending with Ino's brilliant 'Hence Iris away'. The finale came with the sparkling coloratura of Semele's demand that Jupiter adopt his true form—a move that brought about her death, which did not, in this production seem unduly tragic.

In the context of widespread limitations worldwide on music performance, New Zealand's clear-headed government control of Covid-19 risks has been impressive. There were no limitations on audiences and this remarkable production attracted near-full houses with extra seating having to be squeezed in on the last night. This undertaking of a great though not hugely familiar work was in itself a singular achievement in the current circumstances.

LINDIS TAYLOR

POLAND

Warsaw

During a stay in Paris in 2018 the Polish conductor Łukasz Borowicz visited a number of composers' graves at the Père Lachaise cemetery. On the gravestone of Luigi Cherubini there is a list of his works; Borowicz easily found *Lodoiska*, an opera he recorded in 2008, but was intrigued by another Polish sounding name—*Faniska*. He found the Italian version of the music in Oxford. It turned out to be another opera with a Polish theme—the action takes place somewhere in Poland, very much like Jarry's play *Ubu Roi*. The names are funny to a Polish ear; imagine a Duke of Badminton where one