



Susan Graham and Plácido Domingo in the Met's intense *Iphigénie en Tauride*

KEN HOWARD

appeared: in one poignant moment, Iphigénie and Oreste, mysteriously drawn to each other, crouched on either side of a wall that dissolved to reveal their mother standing between them, her hands on their heads. The concluding moments of the opera featured a silent little psychodrama as Iphigénie came to grips with the fact that her brother had murdered her mother, and forgave him.

It all made perfect sense, particularly in the first half, which has the best music and the tightest dramatic structure. Louis Langrée's conducting, muscular yet sensitive, sculpted the narrative, emphasising both variety and continuity in this sombre, rather oppressive tale. The singing of the three principals was impassioned: Graham's richly detailed Iphigénie was filled with warmth and despair; Paul Groves's bright tenor brought force and intelligence to Pylade; and Domingo's clarion sound was also impressive, though he seemed at times to be channelling Siegmund in *Die Walküre*. Having the usually baritone role of Oreste sung in a tenor adaptation, however, eliminated some of the contrast and tension of the crucial Oreste-Pylade relationship. Indeed, the interaction of the three characters sometimes seemed a little abstract: the intention was there, but it was not entirely realised by the performers. In the brief role of the Scythian king Thoas, baritone William Shimell let the character's fury and instability affect his pitch, which was uncertain. The well-prepared chorus was beautifully tuned, and, like its Greek predecessor, a character in itself.

HEIDI WALESON

## Soul food

### Il trittico, Puccini NEW ORLEANS OPERA

New Orleans and opera have a long-standing alliance, especially by the standards of the art form in America. It was in this great and recently beleaguered city that opera had its first stand in North America, starting in 1796. The current New Orleans Opera Association has been in operation since 1943. For the moment, the Opera's home base is at Tulane University's McAlister Auditorium, while its real home, the Mahalia Jackson Theatre – in (Louis) Armstrong Park – is under post-hurricane Katrina repair.

Given opera's long lineage and its present-day resiliency in the face of disaster, some kind of conspicuous poetic justice prevailed when the New Orleans Opera staged Puccini's *Il trittico* with local colours flying. Transferring

the setting of a classic opera to the city of its production can be suspicious business, tipping a work into a parochial gimmickery; but in this case, the factors aligned beautifully. Puccini's alternately lusty, pious, and farcical trilogy on the theme of death found a happy – and tragic – home in New Orleans.

In part, the trilogy's diversity of settings translated neatly to the unique cultural convergence in New Orleans, a city where French, Italian, Acadian, Caribbean, African and other influences have forged a distinctive identity.

In the infidel's lament of *Il Tabarro*, the Seine became the New Orleans port on the Mississippi circa 1959, with the sign for the Tujagues restaurant (founded 1856) prominently featured; *Suor Angelica's* original Siennese nunnery was airlifted to New Orleans' Ursuline Convent; and *Gianni Schicchi's* raucous connivances felt right in the manic midst of the historic French Quarter. In *Schicchi*, the New Orleans flavour was the most pungent, as local references were liberally injected into Giuseppe Adami's libretto.

Under the firm direction of director/conductor Robert Lyall – leading the in-house Louisiana Philharmonic Orchestra – together with stage director Jay Jackson and designer G Alan Rusnak, the three-part production fared beautifully and resourcefully with its evocative, minimal stage sets. Its large cast, with many doublings of characters, offered suitably tragic

and/or comic stage presence and established a bold vocal calibre. Standout singers included tenor and New Orleans native Bryan Hymal, in ardent form as Luigi in *Il tabarro*, and soprano Mardi Byers as soul-suffering Suor Angelica, capturing a keen and apt blend of pathos and piety in her account of the role. *Gianni Schicchi* is (and here, indeed was) an affair rising and falling on the power of the ensemble effort, although mezzo Cindy Sadler (Zita) and baritone Frederick Burchinal (Schicchi) grabbed extra portions of the lime-light.

At intermission, the Cajun delicacy of jambalaya was served in front of the McAlister, a further reminder of how far we were from the land of Puccini: so far, and yet so compatible.

JOSEF WOODARD

## Rags to riches

### La Cenerentola Rossini PORTLAND OPERA

As an archetype, Cinderella's rags-to-riches story has deep roots that have been traced back at least to 9th-century China (and, in one variant recorded by the Roman historian Strabo, to ancient Egypt). Rossini's version famously stands out for abjuring the magical elements associated with most accounts of the fairy-tale. Whatever the reason for rejecting these – whether Enlightenment bias or the practical limitations of available



Gianni Schicchi with the pungent flavour of New Orleans