

Spiritisti *Selmeczi*

HUNGARIAN STATE OPERA

Music ★★★★★

Staging ★★

WORLD PREMIERE

Review by Roderic Dunnett

Photography by Szilvia Csibi

Hungarian composer György Selmeczi's instrumental colours are appealing, his vocal writing attractively dexterous and his often jazzy score has plenty of flair, aplomb and aptness. What lets this new opera down, however, is its libretto.

The best way to characterise the music of Selmeczi's new opera *Spiritisti* (The Spiritists) might be 'modern Baroque'. The music is good and varied, with shades of Kurt Weill or Stravinsky's *Rake*. There is philosophical debate, such as the one that opens Monteverdi's *Poppea*; and the verbal thrusts of Strauss' *Capriccio*, with its argument over the superiority of words or music.

Eszter Novák's production starts promisingly with an eerie front-of-stage, men-only séance, presided over by bass Krisztián Cser's handsome Herceg – a Duke, like Bluebeard. Alas, it then spills into endless fluttering chorus entries that sound like lacklustre, purely time-filling exercises.

The visual side of things picked up during a Harlequinade – like a sort of *Pagliacci* with jokes. István Kovács as Arlecchino came up with a range of funny walks that were as witty as his (mellifluous) Mummies' Play demise

and, in a reprise, resurrection. The singing, as so frequently with Hungarian State Opera, verged on the superlative. The clarity of the Italian diction, however, did not.

The libretto, set in Italian by Selmeczi and his co-librettist, Csilla Péntek, was not available in a printed form on the first night. Hence, reviewers had only the surtitles to cling onto, in Hungarian. Everything thus became quasi-intentionally vague, and sometimes confusing. Interest flagged, and the score's initial electric impact was dimmed.

The opera is based on the Russian Symbolist Aleksander Blok's inspired output, but exactly how it relates is unclear. One must presume, from its play-within-a-play structure, that it derives from *Balaganchik* (*A Puppet Show*), staged by Meyerhold in 1906.

The costumes varied: Sándor Arpád (Desire) circumvents the courtly throng in a tiresome scarf, which indicates he is

an outsider – though this isn't explicit in the text; Arpád sings handsomely. The Harlequin trio is well-kitted (thanks to Edit Zeke's costume designs). The Duke's white coat, like posh-looking oilskin, fuses nobility with naffness. Cser is a gorgeous bass, his vocal warmth outclassing the rest of the cast.

Polina Pasztirczák delights as Colombine, making a striking entrance as a Goethesque 'eternal feminine', summoned to the séance and sheathed in lacerating light; her rewarding vocal range is enchanting. Tenor Adorján Pataki's Pierrot lent as much joy in ensembles as in his lovely solo cantilenas. Two *basso* onlookers, Géza Gábor and Szabolc Hámori, both impressed.

In sum, *Spiritisti* feels like a slightly old-fashioned attempt at contemporary opera that ends up being too clever for its own good. It is certainly ambitious, but conveys rather less than its aspirations.



Roll up for the Harlequinade in Selmeczi's *Spiritisti*