

changing at the interval following 'Possente amor'). Would that half the Verdi I've heard this anniversary season had been as exciting orchestrally!

Doug Fitch, producing and designing, handled blocking and *Personenregie* well, but miscalculated with clownish courtier costumes and make-up, especially when adding disco steps to the lighter choruses (a hoary cliché). Weston Hurt is perhaps more of a Ford or Germont *père*, but his attractive baritone made for a satisfying and musical jester here, with fine legato and a strong emotional investment. Anya Matanovic (Gilda) has glints of metal in her well-projected soprano; she eschewed most traditional cadential high interpolations but lofted an E-flat to cap 'Sì, vendetta' and rode the Storm Trio excitingly. Rolando Sanz's breezy Duke offered sunny Latinate sound, excellent line and diction—everything but secure high Bs. The Handel and Haydn Society Chorus, no less, assisted in this most persuasive endeavour. DAVID SHENGOLD

Dallas

Graeme Jenkins's music directorship of DALLAS OPERA has embraced such achievements as a *Ring* cycle, the company's first *Wozzeck* and *Boris Godunov*, and its 2009 move into the marvellous MARGOT AND BILL WINSPEAR OPERA HOUSE, but it can be boiled down into some quite straightforward figures: 20 years and 60 productions. Strikingly, it happens also to have been bookended by two Dominick Argento operas, and Jenkins bowed out with the April 28 matinee of *The Aspern Papers*. This production was full of significance for the company, since it was Dallas Opera that premiered the work 25 years ago (with a starry cast including Elisabeth Söderström, Frederica von Stade and Richard Stilwell, conducted by Nicola Rescigno). The company clearly believes in the piece—it refused to drop it from the schedule, as most would have done, when financial troubles forced it to slim down the season—and it cast it in the starriest fashion available today.

Certainly, the luxury of hearing Susan Graham and Nathan Gunn lead this cast, plus top-notch orchestral playing under Jenkins, made a case for Argento's music that has not always been delivered so persuasively elsewhere. This is indeed a work partly about music, a paean to the golden age of bel canto that turns Henry James's Aspern from a poet into a composer whose opera on the Medea legend has disappeared (Argento's own libretto also transfers the action from Venice to Lake Como—but then his previous opera, *Casanova's Homecoming*, had already been set in Venice). The action switches back and forth between 1885 and 1835, which is when the young diva Juliana Bordereau leaves the impresario Barelli and becomes infatuated with Aspern, only to find that he has fallen for another singer, Sonia. After Aspern drowns while trying to swim across the lake to Sonia, Juliana renounces her career and shuts herself away—half a century later, we encounter her jealously guarding the manuscript of the opera Aspern composed for her, attended by her spinster niece, Tina, who finds herself being flirted with by a mysterious biographer, identified only as the Lodger, who has come in search of the papers.

Perhaps a metaphor for opera itself, still clinging to the past, Argento's work exerts a fascination when performed with all the musico-dramatic subtlety it was accorded in Dallas. Even if it is more like Barber (in *Vanessa* mode) than Britten, the ambiguities of another Henry James-based opera, *The Turn of the Screw*, are certainly present. Structurally, it is strong enough—with real rigour in its symmetries—to support a shimmering, elusive beauty, one that nearly always evaporates, mirage-like, before teetering into pastiche. Vocal lines reflect the natural inflections of speech. Tina's first-act recollection of her aunt's

past is a sustained set-piece of the sort that opera composers seem to find almost impossible to write these days, and the conversational, four-minute unaccompanied duet for Tina and the Lodger is extraordinary.

This performance was made by its outstanding cast. Acting wonderfully as the prim Tina, Graham (in her belated Dallas Opera debut) seized all Argento's lush opportunities and invested the lines with poignant warmth. She was also absolutely on pitch after those orchestra-less four minutes with Gunn's psychologically illuminating, masterfully sung Lodger.

Alexandra Deshorties was equally persuasive as the young and old Juliana, convincing in her non-linear character development, and allowing her bright soprano to sound a little brittle as age intruded. Joseph Kaiser's suave tenor made him ideal as Aspern, Dean Peterson supplied a supple bass as Barelli, and Sasha Cooke's glinting mezzo served the character of Sonia well.

Tim Albery's superb production evoked a nostalgic, summer-night spirit, mixed with the period mustiness conjured up variously by Andrew Lieberman (sets), Constance Hoffman (costumes) and Thomas Hase (lighting). Going further than the stage directions, Albery cleverly blurred the splits between 1835 and 1885, yet still distinguished the two atmospheres—1885 being more barren than the soft glow of 1835. For Act 2, the walls parted and eventually the stage consisted of little more than a piano, flowers and some chairs—symbols that left one free to absorb the words and music with all the vividness the Winspear's excellent acoustics allow. Quite justifiably, it has come to be recognized as America's finest opera house. JOHN ALLISON



■ 'The Aspern Papers' in Dallas, with (l. to r.) Alexandra Deshorties (the old Juliana), Susan Graham (Tina) and Nathan Gunn (Lodger)

Los Angeles

It wasn't quite seven years at sea, but LOS ANGELES OPERA did have to wait five performances to get its scheduled cast on stage for *Der fliegende Holländer*. On the opening night, the planned Senta bailed 12 minutes before curtain-up, making two of six of the principals replacements, since the scheduled Erik, Jay Hunter Morris, had already cancelled a few weeks earlier. Other covers were called up for ensuing performances; but on March 27 all the intended cast were shipshape, and the result was a sturdy if never sublime *Holländer*.

Nikolaus Lehnhoff's production (on loan from Chicago) was a drastic improvement on LA's old Julie Taymor production, which despite some flashy gimmicks was more