

Typically, Prototype included several productions that could not remotely be considered operas, including *Train With No Midnight*, which nevertheless deserves brief comment because of the unique talent of its writer, composer and performer, Joseph Keckler (seen on January 5). He took to the stage like a stand-up comedian, but addressed issues ostensibly more serious, while subjecting them to dark and devilish humour and interspersing them with songs (backed by a three-person ensemble) that were as scintillating as they were stylistically and linguistically diverse; in one he sang the text backwards. A vaguely Schubertian theme song heard from the piano was conceived as if it might plausibly ‘accompany the opening credits of a mystery show on PBS’.

The title refers to a trip on a Chicago-New York overnight train Keckler took on New Year’s Eve following the much-anticipated apocalypse of 2012’s failure to occur. Ground travel is preferable to air travel, he maintained, because it doesn’t attract terrorism or political crimes. ‘That one man who decapitated another on a Greyhound wasn’t a follower of any cause—he simply wanted to show off to his fellow passengers.’ Keckler joined the train sometime after midnight, hoping that the onboard celebrations would make the ‘sense of restrained festivity’ he associates with trains ‘somewhat less restrained’. As luck would have it, a time change occurred entering Indiana that moved the clocks from 11:30 to 12:30 and midnight was lost in the process.

Mark-Anthony Turnage’s *Greek* shone brightly and often hilariously in its first New York performance at the BROOKLYN ACADEMY OF MUSIC’S NEXT WAVE FESTIVAL. Any thought that the 30-year-old opera might seem dated given its satirical allusions to UK life under Margaret Thatcher proved unfounded, simply because at the performance I attended (on December 9) they appeared to be of minor concern to an audience much taken by the brash irreverence of Steven Berkoff’s refabrication of the Oedipus story, transferred to a ‘cesspit’ location in north London, and by the irrepressible assertiveness of Turnage’s frenetic, stylistically multifarious score.

One of the strengths of the libretto, as adapted from Berkoff by Turnage and Jonathan Moore, is that it often treats its source so loosely that you sometimes think it might go off on its own, thwarting the grim prophecy that Eddy (as Oedipus is known) will kill his father and have ‘a bunk-up with his mum’. The departures also allow for a considerable amount of droll humour. BAM imported Joe Hill-Gibbins’s action-packed staging, with sets by Johannes Schütz, a co-production of Scottish Opera and Opera Ventures first seen at the 2017 Edinburgh Festival, its brilliant four-member cast intact. Alex Otterburn’s Eddy, dressed in a bright orange tracksuit (Alex Lowde designed the costumes), got off to such a high-powered start dramatically that one might not at first have been conscious of his fine baritone voice. Allison Cook gave a sexy and vocally alluring performance as the waitress-turned-wife, and Susan Bullock and Andrew Shore gave pungently seasoned, big-voiced portrayals of Eddy’s supposed parents. Conducting soloists from the Orchestra of Scottish Opera, Stuart Stratford kept spirits high as the music went from jazzy flourishes to music-hall tunes to pseudo-heroic marches and more.

GEORGE LOOMIS

## San Diego

Four years after it almost disappeared, SAN DIEGO OPERA is back. The company is in the black, its general director has signed on for three more years, and the season opening run of *Le nozze di Figaro* was both ambitious and accomplished.

SDO’s last *Figaro* 11 years ago boasted an old-fashioned production but a cast that featured international names. This go-round (heard on October 28) featured a similarly straightforward staging (by Stephen Lawless, one seen in several US cities), yet no starry singers. However, it showcased a clarity—and a dark, seething tone—not usually achieved in grander or more avant-garde settings. Evan Hughes’s *Figaro* entered wearing a similar outfit to the footmen—Leslie Travers’s costumes were good at delineating who was noble and who was not. Hughes sang well, with a robust bass-baritone and clear Italian diction, even if his voice and demeanour suggested a more mature man. Lawless’s dark staging leaves little chemistry between *Figaro* and the Count (a menacing John Moore)—it’s as if *Il barbiere di Siviglia* never happened.

Sarah Shafer’s youthful Susanna shone throughout. Caitlin Lynch was likewise a fine Countess, her ‘Porgi, amor’ containing real pathos. Emily Fons was an over-the-top Cherubino, but was fun to watch and thoroughly credible. She sang ‘Non so più’ at almost twice the speed these ears are used to, but ‘Voi che sapete’ was graceful and spry.

When Susanne Mentzer’s Marcellina sang about women being ‘unjustly oppressed by these ungrateful men’, a beat was held to prompt applause; later in the same act, when *Figaro* told men to ‘open your eyes’, the house lights were brought up as if to point a finger at the audience. But mostly the director focused on keeping the drama present amid the strong singing, and the conductor John Nelson kept the music propulsive even if the details were often lost in the cavernous CIVIC THEATRE (though the fine continuo playing that accompanied the extended scene change in Act 3 was appreciated).

In other welcome news for the area, the UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA SAN DIEGO DEPARTMENT OF MUSIC, in conjunction with ARTPOWER, presented the premiere of *Inheritance*, with music by Lei Liang and a libretto by Matt Donovan. The story involves the California legend of Sarah Winchester, the heir to the Winchester Repeating Arms Company profits, and on the diaphanous curtain there was a video projection of her infamous mansion that still stands in San Jose.

The 65-minute one-act opera opened with a rat-tat-tat that evoked rifle shots. Three voices sang out, counting ‘one, two, three ...’; then, to wailing clarinet sounds, one of the three singing spirits pulled the curtain to reveal a woman, Sarah, with a lit candle. Tortured by the ghosts of all the people killed by the rifles her husband made and sold (the counting we hear is the number of victims), Susan Narucki’s sympathetic Sarah spent much of the opera reacting to the assaulting orchestral sounds and the singing of the spirits. One of the few lines she got to sing in her dark soprano was ‘madness is to do nothing as the number of dead grows’, which speaks to the issue of gun violence in America—on the morning of the performance I attended, October 27, 11 people were gunned down in a Pittsburgh synagogue.

■ Susan Narucki as Sarah Winchester in the premiere of Lei Liang’s ‘Inheritance’



Donovan's libretto likewise hints more than it tells, which works well when Liang's music fills in the gaps—which is often. Harsh harpsichord clusters, lots of clangs and drones, plus rhythmic, almost Kodo-style drumming give the piece real mood. Liang succeeds in evoking Sarah's madness—manifest in her desire to keep building rooms to avoid the spirits. The whole piece has a chugging, minimalist backbeat that keeps the opera moving even during patches when the libretto lacks dramatic build.

The conductor Steven Schick and his eight-strong band brought authority to the score even when doing gimmicky things like strumming the strings of the harpsichord or playing slide whistles. Cara Consilvio's staging felt more like a gussied-up concert performance, but this felt appropriate given the chamber character of the piece.

Like the house in which the opera is set, *Inheritance* feels unfinished, but still closer to completion than many new operas. This is a California-created opera that tells a uniquely Californian story; let's hope it gets a chance to be heard at other, bigger houses in this state—and if all goes well, beyond.

JAMES C. TAYLOR

## San Francisco

Lyrical, stirring and unapologetically sentimental, the composer Jake Heggie and librettist Gene Scheer's appropriation of the classic Frank Capra film *It's a Wonderful Life* hit a sweet spot between opera and musical theatre in its holiday-season run at SAN FRANCISCO OPERA (seen on November 20). Musical good cheer and human virtue prevailed, from a shimmering orchestral prelude to the anthemic full-cast finale. Echoes of (if not outright allusions to) Bernstein, Copland and Sondheim came and went in this quintessentially American evening.

On its third outing following its 2016 premiere at Houston Grand Opera and a subsequent student production at the Indiana University's Jacobs School of Music (co-commissioners of the work, with SF Opera), the piece felt musically and dramatically sure-footed, some missteps notwithstanding. Revisions since Houston include the excision of one singing role, the addition of several duets and a rewritten overture.

Nothing in this new *Life* was more affecting than the choice exchanges between the story's small-town hero George Bailey (a plangent and ravishing performance by the tenor William Burden) and his high-school sweetheart and wife, Mary (the soprano Andriana Chuchman in a sterling company debut). In a different, melodically fractious encounter, George's tense confrontation with the simplistically odious villain Mr Potter (the baritone Rod Gilfry, in aptly caustic voice) was similarly strong.

In retelling the story of a small-town banker who gives up his dream of seeing the world to attend to business and family responsibilities in Bedford Falls, NY, the collaborators trimmed the abundant cast of the 1946 film down to its dramatic essentials. The children in the story are efficiently dispatched in speaking roles. Another matter, addressed more for musical than narrative reasons, was the conversion of the Angel of the film from Clarence to Clara—the soprano Golda Schultz, in a vocally arresting company debut, sounding equally confident on terra firma and when Leonard Foglia's staging hoisted her (and a complement of other elaborately winged angels) up above the stage in flight.

With much of the dialogue rendered in Heggie's flowing arioso, the action took on a liquid momentum even as it shuttled back and forth through time. The composer, a



■ *Other-worldly intervention, for good or ill: (l.) Golda Schultz as Clara in Jake Heggie's 'It's a Wonderful Life' in San Francisco; (r.) Seattle's 'Turn of the Screw'*

hometown hero who once worked in SF Opera's press department before going on to create *Dead Man Walking* and *Moby-Dick* among others, writes in a more ingratiatingly tuneful mode here. Most of it works, but the comic Mekee-Mekee motif, referencing George's travel dreams, is overplayed.

Robert Brill's projection-enhanced set, revised for this staging, featured a seeming infinity of doors, each one ostensibly representing a day in George's life. This device made for some choice images of memory made manifest, but it also imposed a restrictive checkerboard blocking. A more substantial miscalculation came in the second act. Not a note of music was heard during the dramatically cathartic passage in which George is shown a sorely diminished Bedford Falls in which he'd never existed. What ought to be the work's expressive and emotional peak passes by on operatic mute.

All was forgiven, however, when we reached the gorgeous final number, the cast layering one ascendant vocal line atop another. 'No one,' they sang, as if everyone in Bedford Falls believed it to the core, 'is a failure who has a friend'.

STEVEN WINN

## Seattle

If SEATTLE OPERA's performance of Britten's *The Turn of the Screw* (October 24) demonstrated anything, it is what a remarkably versatile opera this is. Even in this 3,000-seat theatre Britten's chamber score resonated and Myfanwy Piper's taut adaptation of Henry James's enigmatic story drew you in claustrophobically close. While the production had its shortcomings, one never doubted the disturbing power of this intimate masterpiece.

The production was set in the period of the opera's composition. There were appealing 1950s touches in Deborah Trout's costumes. The set was an artful repurposing of Robert A. Dahlstrom's scenery for *Don Giovanni*. A towering geometric wall was effectively confined and defined by Adam Larson's projections of manor-house facades