

Manon at Covent Garden, WC2



Manon Donald Cooper

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Were Massenet a film director rather than an opera composer, he would have to be Cecil B. DeMille. Exotic fashions, social satire, lustful love, religious piety — the only vintage Hollywood ingredient missing from *Manon* is Charlton Heston parting the Red Sea. Some recent productions have pounced on the celluloid overtones: when Anna Netrebko sang *Manon* at the Berlin State Opera, all Massenet's material girl wanted was movie-star glitz in the 1950s.

Cast in the role once more, Netrebko burns up the Covent Garden stage with her sexual allure, creamy top notes and dramatic fire. But the context is different. Laurent Pelly's gorgeous new production shifts the opera back to the Belle Epoque, viewed with a roving painterly eye. Chantal Thomas's Parisian setting offers the exquisite social glitter of James Tissot's canvases, with Degas' ballet dancers pirouetting through. Other scenes reference Surrealist landscapes and French Art Deco film sets. But whatever the overtone, almost every design works superbly as a performance space; the perfect parade ground, too, for Joël Adam's imaginative lighting, and the clear cut of Pelly's costumes, designed with Jean-Jacques Delmotte.

Pelly's Manon is never the innocent ingénue. In Act I, look at the way Netrebko's convent-bound girl poses with her hands, as if to say "Oh, little me!" Look at the flirt's artful footsteps as she approaches anything in trousers, angling for the bright lights. By Act III the lights dazzle. She's a diva's dream in pink and white; then she's slinky and skimpy, just the ticket for leading her bewitched lover Des Grieux from his priestly path. By Act V, every chicken has come home to roost. Wan, bedraggled, nearing death: what better end could an opera heroine have?

Netrebko's vocal ardour, unflinching in the highest altitudes, is easily matched by Vittorio Grigolo's as Des Grieux. Considering parts of this tenor's biography, like his "popera" CD *In the Hands of Love*, some in the audience may have come to sniff. No condescension was possible. This was a voice ablaze, mobile in dynamics like Des Grieux's heart, able to soar and sob alike without the slightest strain. The house loved him.

Incisive work, too, from the conductor Antonio Pappano and the sparkling orchestra; from Christophe Mortagne's Guillot, preening and ogling, and the background hubbub of good-time girls. A few middling voices, true, with Russell Braun's cloudily sung Lescaut uppermost. But a couple of dips here and there can't take the shine off this sumptuous feast.

Box office: 020-7304 4000, to July 10