

Rachel Smith designed the risky set, full of steep stairs, and the colourful costumes were courtesy of Dena Sheh. Opera in the Heights's artistic director Enrique Carreón-Robledo led an uncut reading of the score and, although often a brisk conductor, he here indulged in some funereal tempos that foreshadowed the doomed heroine's tuneful decline and demise.

Despite declaring herself sceptical regarding updating in a programme note, for Opera in the Heights's next show the director Keturah Stickann nonetheless moved *Don Pasquale* forward 70 years, from 1842 to 1910 (seen on November 16). And she did so for the oddest reason: 'The line of the dresses works much better on OH's charming jewel of a stage.' Fortunately, the company newcomer's fashion sense (realized in handsome costumes by Sheh again) didn't dampen her comic sense, and her Lambert Hall staging of the Donizetti comedy brimmed with sunny fun. Furthermore, the cast—Stefano de Peppo and Octavio Moreno singing strongly as Don Pasquale and Dr Malatesta, Eric Bowden sweet-toned as Ernesto, and the OH debutante Katie Dixon ripe-voiced as Norina—sang and acted with verve. Carreón-Robledo's sprightly if often singer-covering conducting was marbled with plenty of caressing rubato.

WILLIAM ALBRIGHT

Milwaukee

'Nobody, until they see it, has been able to understand what we are trying to do,' said SKYLIGHT MUSIC THEATRE's new artistic director, Viswa Subbaraman, of his brilliantly insane new Bollywood-style production of *Fidelio*. Experiencing the production in performance reveals that there is a logic to Subbaraman's insanity that ultimately pinpoints the truth. And the reason his strange brand of logic is so compelling is that it is

■ *Beethoven goes Bollywood: Eric McKeever as Don Pizarro in Milwaukee*



built on a close understanding of Beethoven's music. Under Subbaraman, the strings of the Skylight Theatre Orchestra played with a clean, taut sound that carried the drama: thanks to them, the tortured elements of this dark opera confronted the audience as strongly as its heroic side. The winds were invisible dancers; the actual dancers, on stage, had striking, often delicate choreography by Deepa Devasena that highlighted the opera's emotions to an extent that few productions achieve.

The set, by the Bangalore-based designer Raghava KK, was alluring, whimsically fairy-tale, thoroughly over the top and absolutely convincing.

For the finale, Subbaraman wore a brain EEG reader so that his brainwaves changed the colour and design of the stars and lights projected onto the set—it was more than simply a gimmick, and the result enhanced the drama on stage. Karen Brown-Larimore's costumes were ravishing as well as splendidly exaggerated, complementing the trance-like world of the set.

The most powerful presence on stage was Eric McKeever as Don Pizarro, whose singing combined darkness with clarity; his cartoonish performance as a sort of ecstatically demented Beethovenian Monastatos was in line with Subbaraman's fantasy theme. Erica Schuller's Marzelline, sung with beauty and sweetness, was another highlight. As Leonore, Cassandra Black had passages when she articulated strong emotions successfully, yet there were too many bland episodes in between, and Chase Taylor's anaemic singing meant his characterization of Florestan fell flat. Too much of the other singing was journeyman, too, and, oddly for a production so focused on enhancing the drama, long passages of the dialogue (the work was sung and spoken in English) came across as almost entirely wooden.

Subbaraman is clearly a rising star, fired by musicality and an insistence on putting the art of the composer first. His Milwaukee *Fidelio* was stunning in its audacity, but would be better at a major house that can afford the best possible singers—an element of operatic performance that just cannot be ignored.

JONATHAN RICHMOND

New York

The METROPOLITAN OPERA finally has a new production of *Falstaff*. It almost had one (by Nicholas Hytner and Bob Crowley, rumour has it) a dozen years ago, but the general manager Joseph Volpe vetoed it after seeing preliminary plans and chose to rejuvenate Franco Zeffirelli's 1964 production instead. The result—despite sets and costumes recreated anew—offered proof that no production can last for ever. It looked old on arrival and was revived in only one more season. Small wonder that the New York audience, notwithstanding its love of Zeffirelli productions, responded enthusiastically to Robert Carsen's new staging (seen at the HD-transmitted matinee on December 14), which had already appeared at two of the four other co-producing companies, Covent Garden and La Scala. It delights the eye with its classy sets and costumes (by Paul Steinberg and Brigitte Reiffenstuel respectively) and triggers plenty of laughs, but *Falstaff* could certainly use a change of underwear. Seeing him get out of bed in grungy long johns at Carsen's five-star Garter Inn is one thing, but must he similarly reappear in Act 3? The singer in question was again Ambrogio Maestri, whose voice and girth—the latter acknowledged by the *New York Times* by printing his recipe for sausage risotto—constitute ideal ingredients for the role. And with 200 *Falstaffs* under his expansive belt, he rarely misses an opportunity to charge a phrase with character.

Otherwise, each participating opera house has come up with its own distinctive casts for the production. And here, with Angela Meade and Stefanie Blythe on board, Maestri was not the only amply-proportioned singer. Nor is a voice as sizeable as Meade's a prerequisite for Alice Ford, but her portrayal was distinguished by a lively, conversational approach to words, a sign of her growing artistry, even if some of Alice's most melting phrases coarsened a bit. Surely no one has delivered the word 'reverenza' more resoundingly than Blythe, though it is not easy to stave off thoughts of Ethel Merman, and Blythe tended to dominate ensembles. Lisette Oropesa, looking