Other people’s music: Corigliano at the Met

by John Simon

On The Ghosts of Versailles.

Comme c’est long!
—Tristan Corbière, “Grand Opéra”

Long in gestation and long in duration, The Ghosts of Versailles has arrived at the Metropolitan Opera as one of the most sumptuous productions I have seen on any operatic stage. With music by John Corigliano and a libretto by William M. Hoffman, it is the first new opera commissioned by the Met in a quarter century, or since Samuel Barber’s Antony and Cleopatra and Marvin David Levy’s much worse Mourning Becomes Electra proved failures. It was twelve years ago, in 1979, that James Levine suggested to Corigliano at a dinner party that he write an opera for the Met’s centenary season, 1983-84; the three-hour work did not get written and produced till December 17, 1991, amid considerable hoopla and fanfare. (It had become, along the way, a joint commission with the Chicago Lyric Opera, where it will be seen during the 1995-96 season.) Was it worth the effort, the wait, and the reported four-million-dollar cost?

Corigliano told Levine that he wanted to write an opera buffa; when Levine pointed out that comic operas sometimes get lost in that vast house, Corigliano promised a “grand opera buffa,” presumably a new genre. He turned to his long-time friend Hoffman for the text, and made two stipulations: that it lend itself to the use of melody, and that it contain a Turkish scene. There was a craze in late-eighteenth-century and early-nineteenth-century music for things Turkish—the Turcomania whose summit achievements were Mozart’s Die Entführung aus dem Serail and Rossini’s L’Italiana in Algieri. The request still sounds to me rather like saying “What I want from a friend is good character and bushy eyebrows.”

The reason Corigliano wanted to write a funny opera was that “a lot of contemporary opera is for the orchestra; the singer holds a note while the orchestra goes crazy. By definition, if you’re writing an opera buffa, you’re going to write melodically.” Perhaps—although Orff, in Die Kluge and Der Mond, managed to write comic operas far more rhythmic than melodic. I suspect that the real reason is that Corigliano likes to play musical games—allusion, parody, pastiche— that
clearly work only in comedy. Moreover, he and Hoffman wished to make an opera out of 
Beaumarchais’s third Figaro play, *L’autre Tartuffe ou la Mère coupable*, because the two previous 
plays of the trilogy, *The Barber of Seville* and *Figaro’s Marriage*, had done so well by Rossini and 
Mozart, whose styles Corigliano could kid.

The authors were disappointed both because *The Guilty Mother* turned out to be not a comedy but 
a melodrama, and because it proved very bad. It concerns the Almavivas twenty years later, when 
the Count’s illegitimate daughter, Florestine, by an unnamed noblewoman, and the Countess’s 
son, Léon, by her one deviation from the straight and narrow with Cherubino while her husband 
was long absent as governor of Mexico, are living in the Almaviva household in Paris, where the 
Count is the Spanish ambassador. He hates his good and loving Rosina for her one misstep, 
ignoring his own misbehavior and love child. Léon and Florestine, moreover, are in love, in 
defiance of what may look like incest.

This fraught family circle is infiltrated by the villainous Irish major Patrick Honoré Bégearss, 
former secretary to Almaviva and now his false friend who intends to marry Florestine and fleece 
and ruin the rest of the household. The naïve Count is putty in his hands, but Figaro and his 
faithful Susanna, after numerous pathetic and melodramatic twists, succeed in unmasking 
Bégearss, reconciling the Count and Countess, and enabling the young lovers—no blood 
relations—to marry happily. Even the editor of the *Pléiade* Beaumarchais, Pierre Larthomas, 
comments that this inferior work is “no longer played, and will doubtless never be.” What may 
have appealed to Corigliano, who, as Michael C. Nott has remarked in *Opera News*, “tends … to 
draw on a wide range of styles—in his view ‘techniques’—rather than making any single one the 
basis of his music,” is that the hybrid genre of melodrama, which contains blackly comic evil as 
well as lily-white sentimentality, could allow him to indulge his penchant for parody or, to put it 
less kindly, derivativeness. Ambiguity of various kinds can even be read out of Beaumarchais’s 
remark in the preface to his play that he “composed with a straightforward and pure intention: 
with the cool head of a man and the burning heart of a woman, as has been said of Rousseau… . 
This moral ‘hermaphroditism’ is less rare than one might think.”

I can see where hermaphroditism, moral or other, might appeal to Corigliano and Hoffman, who 
would perceive it as a justification for trying out their wide range of styles—sorry, techniques. 
They could thus not only allude to Mozart and Rossini, but also indulge in any verbal and musical 
hanky-panky to which male heads with female hearts might be prone.

But given the sorry plot, an overplot was needed: Beaumarchais in heaven falls in love with 
Marie Antoinette, still unresigned and disconsolate, and proposes to write a play to cheer her 
up, a play that is roughly *La Mère coupable*, with which he undertakes to rewrite history as it 
should have been: Marie Antoinette escaping the guillotine with the help of Beaumarchais—or his 
acknowledged alter ego, Figaro—and ending up forever Beaumarchais’s beloved. Yet since the 
Figaro of the play is at first a good Republican and unwilling to help a monarch, Beaumarchais 
must—at the peril of his eternal salvation, it seems—enter his own creation, the play-within-the-
play he has entitled *A Figaro for Antonia*, and take matters into his own hands. This means getting hold of the Queen’s famous necklace, which keeps changing hands throughout, and turning it into cash to buy Marie Antoinette’s escape. Confusing? Yes. Silly? Definitely.

Three casts intermingle: the ghosts of the dead aristocrats, the characters from *La Mère coupable*, and the populace and soldiers of the Revolution. This means juggling with afterlife (the ghosts), life (the French Revolution), and the life of the drama (Beaumarchais inventing or rewriting his play, trying to change history through art). What is rotating through the air here may be inspired juggling or just plain balls.

Consider, first, this heaven or limbo from which, in the prologue, ghosts are floating down to Versailles. There is nobody here but these dead aristocrats flying, floating, lolling about. There is the odious Woman with Hat, a busybody, and Louis XVI, who keeps playing cards with the Marquis, his confidant, while under his very nose Beaumarchais courts his wife, the Queen, who is called Antonia when that suits the meter of the verse passages, Antoinette when that facilitates the rhyme. After expressing his indifference to the goings-on, and long ignoring them, Louis suddenly challenges Beaumarchais—a commoner—to a duel. They run each other through, but of course cannot die, whereupon the entire ghostly company merrily falls to skewering one another.

So these *ci-devant* aristocrats and human beings require a couple of centuries to discover there is no carnage in heaven? License, sure; but how poetic? Even fantasy must have its own kind of sense. What good is a chorus of blasé ghosts expressing ennui by takings turns to say they’re as bored “as a rug,” “as an egg,” “as a potato”? Just how bored can a rug get? Eggs, in fact, are full of yolks. Yet these similes, later reduced to mere tags (“rug … egg … potato”) keep cropping up as a refrain any sensible librettist would refrain from.

Marie Antoinette rejects Beaumarchais, whereat he sings, “Orion, Orion, / Even the moon moves / And is laced gently by leaves.” What has this to do with the price of eggs, or potatoes? It is pseudo-poeticism for its own debilitating sake. Now Marie Antoinette sings the aria of her tragic destiny, including the stanza about earlier, sweeter memories:

> Once there was a golden bird  
> In a garden of silver trees.  
> From the garden could be heard  
> The laughter of women at their ease.

This provides one of the opera’s principal leitmotives, as Patrick J. Smith informs us, especially in the three notes of “golden bird.”

Yet how facile and primitive those lines are, what with the simplistic juxtaposition of golden bird and silver trees, and the blandness of it all, with that laughter of women’s voices, as if men only cackled. Compare this to the real thing, James Agee set by Samuel Barber in *Knoxville: Summer of 1915*: “It has become that time of evening when people sit on their porches, rocking
gently and talking gently and watching the street and the standing up into their sphere of possession of the trees, of birds’ hung havens, hangars … voices gentle and meaningless like the voices of sleeping birds.”

And to Hoffman’s insipid words Corigliano provides a tuneless melody where soaring is needed. The melisma on “laughter” is effective but predictable, as are the bits of parlando strewn into the aria, notably the counting of steps to the scaffold, which Teresa Stratas delivered with chilling raucousness: “Three steps. Four…. Seven. Eight.” But with the horror of those numerals there came across at the Met also the crudeness of Miss Stratas’s Bride-of-Frankenstein delivery.

Beaumarchais offers a sample of his play on a stage-within-the-stage. Figaro is dodging pursuing creditors and unwed mothers of his making until he locks them all into a closet and proceeds to deliver a feeble knock-off of the Rossini “Largo al factotum” (which Patrick J. Smith calls “damn near … outdoing the Swan of Pesaro”): the patter song of a panting, nearly petered-out Figaro, twenty years older: “My money is low, / My status less than quo. / I’m poor, I’m weak, / My future’s rather bleak. / I’m stooped, I’m spent. / I’m almost impotent.” Note the flimsy filler words rather and almost; note also the silliness. Why is Figaro’s future rather bleak? Because the librettist says so.

But then an equally arbitrary reversal: “My spirit—/ A vapor deliquescent, / An effervescent liquid / Pervading, invading, taking my body, / Making me fluid, light, buoyant. / I’m sunlight, a moonbeam, / And carefree I fly to the stars.” Notice how Hoffman runs out of rhyme where it could be most sustaining, most buoyant. He falls back instead on self-indulgent jingles, “deliquescent-effervescent,” “pervading-invading,” and — again! — on the good old gold-and-silver standard: “I’m sunlight, a moonbeam.” Forthwith Figaro, who has just described himself as “A man for the ladies / And father of babies,” becomes a star-trekker as he flies past a litany of star monikers: “Capella, Carmina, / Spica, Auriga, / Libra, Lyra, / Andromeda, / Fornax, Phoenix, / Bellatrix, Pollux. Joy! Joy!” Hear especially the salacious echoes in Fornax, Fel … er … Bellatrix, and the joy-filled ejaculation, “Pollux.”

At this point Corigliano’s music does come to life. Having begun the opera with eerily inchoate sound sequences, serial rows, glissandos, quarter tones, various kinds of inversion — just like the beginning of his Clarinet Concerto — Corigliano, inspired by this journey to the stars, lets go with shimmering, high-register, astral music, reminiscent (this time, I suspect, unintentionally) of the apotheosis music in Strauss (Ariadne auf Naxos, Die Frau ohne Schatten, Daphne) where a transfiguration takes place.

But let us say the Strauss evocation is deliberate pastiche. Such pastiche is a very sly maneuver; if you are skillful about it, your position is impregnable. Familiar-sounding? Of course. Imitative? Why not? Too close for comfort? On the contrary, the comfort is in the closeness, the cleverness of the pastiche, the wit of parody. Indeed, the three chief echoers in the music — Mozart, Rossini, Strauss — keep popping up everywhere, often in direct quotations, but this is made to devolve to
Corigliano’s credit: What difference is there between playing with notes and playing with other composers’ groups of notes? Right?

*The Ghosts of Versailles* tries to have it every which way. It means to be both grand and buffa, both profound and irreverent, both didactic and campy. “We’re dealing with the ghosts of our own cultural tradition,” says Hoffman, “Versailles representing the heritage of well-made objects, of beauty. We’re dealing with the ghosts of beauty in our Western culture.” Yet even while he and Corigliano were working on *Ghosts*, Hoffman (until then best known for his work in soap opera) produced his one claim to fame, the AIDS play *As Is* (1985), in which an aspiring actress posing for publicity shots says to the photographer, “I want that role so bad. I play the ghost of Marie Antoinette. *(taking a tits-and-ass pose)* How do you like this, hon? ‘Let them eat …’” This smutty joke about its heroine hardly suggests an opera in the making whose preoccupation is with beauty in Western culture.

“As a lyric poet,” Hoffman continues, “I was thinking of my goal of beauty, of nobility, as well as fun… This wasn’t a romp-through opera. It’s not anarchic at all. I was writing lyrics that were meant to be compared to the great lyrics of the past.” Which great lyrics? Sappho? Keats? Hofmannsthal? Irving Berlin? And how seemly is it for the music to indulge itself to the extent that where Bégearss exclaims angrily about the success of his rival, “Léon? Léon? LEON!” the music replicates the notes from Ravel’s song cycle *Histoires naturelles*, where the peacock utters his cry, “Léon! Léon!”?

Hard upon this follows Bégearss’s dastardly credo, “Aria of the Worm,” suggested, we are told, by an epic poem by Boito (more scavenging), but which seems to be an attempt to outdo Mussorgsky’s “Song of the Flea,” while also providing Bégearss with something comparable to Iago’s “Credo” in Verdi’s *Otello*. Here is what we are to compare to the great lyrics of the past:

... Cut him in two,
Each part’ll renew.
Slice him to bits,
The worm persists.
He still crawls on.
Scales walls on
Sheer will, and
Burrows burning sand.
Long live the worm.
He travels on by
The poor man’s sty,
Groveling past
The royal palace ...

Slant rhyme (e.g., “bits-persists”) is perfectly fine, but “past-palace” is not slant, or scant, or any kind of rhyme. And what of the subliterate “each part’ll renew,” without an object, *itself*? And
why, except for assonance with travel, would the worm grovel past the royal palace when the point is the supremacy of the victorious worm?

In the duet where Rosina and Cherubino make love—a retrospect Beaumarchais offers Marie Antoinette as an aphrodisiac—Hoffman emulates the geographical preciosity of Mlle de Scudéry’s Carte de Tendre, rather too academic for a seduction scene, but the real problem, again, is the lyricism: “Come now, my darling, come with me, / Come to the room I have made for thee. / Let us strew the bed with flowers—/ There we will spend the hours.” But the fearless challenger of the great doggerel of the past follows this with even better: “Yes, yes, my darling. I’ll come with thee, / Come to the room that is made for me,” whereupon they fall to coupling al fresco.

Be it noted in passing that a favorite Hoffman trick is to make a line applicable simultaneously to the Almaviva characters and the commenting ghosts, so both can sing it in unison—a trick that palls quickly. It is, however, as nothing to the cuteness of the entire reception scene at the Turkish embassy, where the Count tries to sell the necklace of the Queen to the British ambassador for money to be used for her rescue. Bégearss and his oafish servant, Wilhelm, try to get the necklace away from him, but it is Figaro, in drag as a dancing girl importunately rubbing against the Count, who eventually spirits the necklace away in a scene calculated to delight equally connoisseurs of camp and guileless simpletons.

Indeed, this Turcomanic scene unleashed the evening’s noisiest ecstasies. Be it said that the British director, Colin Graham, improved on the authors’ campiness with an added layer of his own. The Pasha (Turkish ambassador) was converted into a huge automaton atop a platform in the back, manipulated by five men from below. The doll, thirty feet tall even sitting cross-legged, could roll its eyes, part its lips, clap its hands, and tap one foot as the voice of a basso below (truly profundo!) was piped into it. A live page sat in its lap, and at the scene’s climax Figaro climbed up on the Pasha’s turban, made it explode spectacularly, and escaped in the melee. The scene opened with two enormous, pasha-sized figures of scimitar-wielding swordsmen entertaining the guests; these expensive props were promptly wheeled off and never seen again. Later, when Figaro is supposed to be pursued by soldiers, Graham gave us instead six six-foot-tall heads, six spheres inside which a live operator was pushing a sort of wheelbarrow. This conspicuous waste, featuring 120 people running around the stage, must have made a single scene cost the price of an entire, more modest and better, opera.

But to get the full measure of Mr. Graham’s intellect, consider his note in the program, wherein he states that Bégearss “represents what Wilde called ‘the worst excesses of the French Revolution.’” Now, that flat little tag makes sense only if you quote Lady Bracknell’s entire, funny sentence: “To be born, or at any rate bred, in a handbag, whether it had handles or not, seems to me to display a contempt for the ordinary decencies of family life that reminds one of the worst excesses of the French revolution.” To quote merely the seven last words of Lady Bracknell is like proudly saying “Bégearss represents what Shakespeare called ‘O what a rogue.’”
Even unenhanced, though, what Hoffman contrived is bad enough. There are interpolations of Turkish dialogue that are totally otiose, while Corigliano comes up with an Egyptian belly dancer, Samira, who sings both a cavatina and a cabaletta (we don’t do things by halves!) to words that are the lowest of low camp and begin:

I am in a valley and you are in a valley.
I have no she- or he-camel in it.
In every house there is a cesspool.
That’s life.

The fact that Marilyn Horne, who does Samira, looks rather like a she-hippopotamus makes the scene even campier, especially when you consider her suggestive gestures with her veils, and her singing a couple of bars while pinching and releasing her nostrils to achieve, as a New York Times article quotes her, “the high, warbling sound … crowds of Arabic women” make. Throughout this, as also elsewhere, there is a sizable, fully-costumed onstage orchestra, complete with conductor, playing little, but greatly adding to the confusion.

Meanwhile our transvestite Figaro does obscene things with a banana and more and more (somewhat suspect) Turkish enters the text, with the cabaletta sung entirely in that language. There are double-entendres as when Figaro en travesti offers the Count and the British ambassador fruit (“figi, figi”), and authorial self-congratulation as Marie Antoinette cheers, “Bravo, Beaumarchais! It’s wonderful!” even as the ghosts do their rug-potato-egg noodling again. Then a bunch of peripatetic rheita players invades the scene, the rheita being a North African oboe, although Corigliano specifies that the rheitas be “disguised kazoo.” At the climax of the scene, the Woman with Hat from the opening scene (atrociously sung by Jane Shaufuss) exclaims, “This is not opera! Wagner is opera!!” The director improves on this by bringing her on in full Valkyrie regalia: horned helmet, breastplate, spear. Chaos rules supreme as Act I ends.

Corigliano has, of course, written musical persiflage for the entire scene—this, after all, is the composer who stuck a tango by Albéniz into his AIDS symphony. Yet one is forced to wonder whether the opera and its production don’t do as much disservice to camp as they do to opera. For camp, like pastiche, is funniest when it is small and sassy; make the takeoff as lavishly elephantine as what is being spoofed, and the joke turns sour. Deflation with a pin is amusing; with a steamroller, it isn’t.
Act II begins with elaborate counterpointing of the ghosts’ and the Beaumarchais characters’ dialogue and music, and climaxes in a big laugh: “Marie Antoinette: I want to live again. Can you do that, Beaumarchais? Beaumarchais: Yes! We shall live in Philadelphia... Louis: If you can call that living. Woman with Hat: Every day I thank God that I’m dead.” Buffà is all very well, but this is more like the old buffola. Then, as Figaro refuses to use the necklace for the Queen’s salvation, Beaumarchais enters his own play to bring his recalcitrant gracioso back in line. This isto make “history as it should have been” and enable Beaumarchais to make Marie Antoinette.

The idea of having the author get involved with the creatures of his imagination is not new. It is all over Pirandello and crops up even in Lewis Carroll when Alice dresses down her tormentors as just a pack of cards. It is the central device in a musical such as City of Angels, and something like it also governs Schnitzler’s one-acter The Green Cockatoo, which, moreover, also uses the French revolution as backdrop. But there are two whopping absurdities in the handling of the conceit here. First, the notion that rewriting your artifact can rewrite history (the Back to the Future syndrome), and second, that Beaumarchais, by entering his play, somehow sacrifices his eternal salvation for love. Why shouldn’t he exit the play as he entered it?

Yet everything hinges on this specious sacrifice: it is what makes Marie Antoinette fall in love with Beaumarchais. This is the weakest aspect of a weak libretto and music: neither verbally nor musically are we made to believe in and care for this love story. But if we don’t believe and care, how are we to buy what Hoffman calls the “philosophical basis of the opera,” that it is “a spiritual reconciliation between the legitimate desire to improve things, which represents the revolution [i.e., is represented by the revolution], and the spirit of the ancien régime. So my marriage between the two is after death, in the afterworld, between the two leading proponents of both [i.e., the leading proponents of each].” What disingenuous nonsense! If this were “the motivation for the whole thing,” as Hoffman also says, the piece would not be flagrant camp, and the two main characters would be more complex and more real. This Marie Antoinette, who reminds me of nothing so much as the Beggarwoman in Sweeney Todd, is not a leading proponent of anything: she moons, moans, sulks, and gripes, and has not one idea in her glued-on head. And Beaumarchais is merely the constant lover from start to finish, which is very nice but of little symbolic or philosophical value.

And once inside his play, poor Beaumarchais loses any resemblance to a real character. When it suits the authors, he becomes a magician able to conjure up the trial of Marie Antoinette with himself as the judge and a whole crowd of jeering extras, but when he should really stop Bégears and his minions, he is completely without power. Where, I repeat, is the consistency even fantasy cannot dispense with? Tennis, for example, is an arbitrary construct; but it remains tennis; it does not change in mid-game into ice hockey.

Andrew Porter, writing recently in The New Yorker, has gone farther than anyone into listing the sources of the music. The Act I quintet “begins with the first strains of ‘Voi che sapete.’” Susanna
and Rosina’s memory duet in Act II “is spun over an accompaniment of the *Cosi fan tutte* ‘Soave sia il vento.’” Almaviva’s palace band plays “a minuet drawn from ‘Se vuol ballare.’” In the scene in which Beaumarchais frightens the rebellious Figaro, he “confronts him with the Statue music from *Don Giovanni.*” We have already noted Figaro’s entrance aria as an “homage to Rossini’s ‘Largo al factotum.’” The first-act finale contains some “exchanges of the *Barbiere* quintet.” “Bégearss’s second dull aria”—in which he stirs up the *tricoteuses* of Paris to storm Almaviva’s farewell party by likening the aristocrats to rats (aristocrats?) to the accompaniment of musical scurrying and squealing—“has origins in Corigliano’s own flute concerto ‘Pied Piper Fantasy,’” and “the tangy, microtonal … sound of the oboes in the first finale … was also used in his Oboe Concerto.”

But, for the most part, Act II is musically becalmed. At such times the director overcompensates, as when he proffers four concentric prosceniums: the Met’s own and, behind it, receding into the distance and getting smaller and smaller, three others—a set of Chinese stage boxes. At the Almavivas’ farewell ball, three huge skulls in Napoleonic hats look down on the scene. And here we get the first of several set pieces in which we are supposed to be moved by the music becoming slow, very slow; the model, barely approached, seems to be the final trio from *Rosenkavalier.* Here are four lines from Hoffman’s (not Hofmannsthal’s) quartet:

*Léon:* Remember the fragrance of mushrooms in the air?

*Rosina:* I remember a shimmering light.

*Almaviva:* I remember a star-filled night.

*Florestine:* I remember there were raindrops in your hair.

You can’t get much closer than that to the great lyrics of the past.

The prison scene where the Almavivas have one night in which to decide whether to face the guillotine or yield up Florestine to Bégearss (and then, most likely, go to the guillotine anyway) has some of the opera’s best music, but again desperately capitalizes on being slow, very slow, as if languor guaranteed deep emotion. Still, the alternation between tremolando strings, mostly in a low register, with solo woodwinds is pretty enough, which leads us, slower than slow, into the opera’s pièce de résistance, the Quintet and Miserere. While Figaro and Beaumarchais are away trying to get help, the Almavivas and Susanna sing: “Storm and fire overwhelm me, / Fear and death are at my door, / But the thought of those dear faces / Brings me rest in this time of war.” *War* is hardly the *mot juste,* but it does provide a rhyme. But why the *thought* of those dear faces when they’re all right there? *Sight,* surely?

At this point, in an upper-tier cell of the Conciergerie, we see the shadow of the Queen, and hear her sing a Miserere that eventually blends adroitly with the Almavivas’ Quintet. Slowness here wrecks its masterpiece. Beaumarchais and Figaro arrive, having intrigued their way into the Almavivas’ cell, but the key to Marie Antoinette’s, alas, resides with the crass Wilhelm, Bégearss’s man. The women—Rosina, Susanna, and Florestine—manage to vamp it away from
him in a kind of modified gang-bang scene, while Almaviva watches in indignant incomprehension—a fellow too thick even for a thin operatic character. And we hear stuff like: “Beaumarchais: Your wife is bold but never mannish. Figaro: Her dad was Welsh, her mother Spanish.” Again: “Beaumarchais: A woman free is man’s delight. Figaro: What’s a bitch without a bite?” This could successfully compete in any non-sequitur championship.

Beaumarchais can now release the Queen, but Bégearss pops in with the soldiery. Figaro denounces him as a counterrevolutionary who wants to keep the necklace for himself; it is found on him, and he is carted off to his end. As the others escape, Beaumarchais offers the Queen her freedom. She refuses to change history, somehow feeling that only in death can she remain with her beloved playwright. This makes very little sense, but after three hours, who cares? Her final aria, rewritten to the specifications of Miss Stratas, is very different from what is printed in the libretto, but, again, who cares? The music, yet again slow, very slow, turns totally pseudo-Mozartian for the finale. We see in the distance the blade falling on Marie Antoinette’s head, while overhead a small Mongolfier brothers’ hot-air balloon carries the miniaturized version of the Mère coupable characters off to the safety of England.

Meanwhile poet and queen ascend into the air. As Andrew Porter puts it, “in the gardens of Aguas Frescas (according to the score) or in Paradise (according to the Met synopsis) the ghosts of Marie Antoinette and Beaumarchais find peace,” and the opera that began with a serial tone row ends while, to quote Patrick J. Smith, “the orchestra cadences on a serene A-major pianissimo.” The applause on opening and subsequent nights was fortissimo, however. But what, really, was being applauded? No doubt a generally fine cast in which, among twenty-three soloists, only Judith Christin (Susanna) and the aforementioned Jane Shaufuss were bad. Miss Stratas, aside from lacking class as always, is beginning to lose her lower register, while her upper one has a disturbing steely edge, but oh, how she tries, both vocally and histrionically! The rest of the cast, though, shines, with Gino Quilico (Figaro), Renée Fleming (Rosina), Håkan Hagegård (Beaumarchais), Tracy Dahl (Florestine), and Graham Clark (Bégearss) especially impressive. Marilyn Horne, although ludicrous as Samira, still has enough of her once-mighty voice for the undemanding tessitura of her part.

Applauded, too—perhaps above all—were John Conklin’s ostentatious sets and costumes. The scenery was not exactly uncluttered, but, opulent and versatile, it achieved kaleidoscopic effects. One could see where those millions of dollars went—or, rather, sashayed, capered, tripped, and thronged. Surely, what was being applauded was trappings and tumult. One could see the Met audience, usually ready to join the chorus of ghosts here as they sing, “another evening at the opera…. I’m so bored, bored, bored,” stirred up by the whirling spectacle to the point where I wondered whether the mise-en-scène without a single note of music might not have been applauded and cheered just as vigorously.

The abiding question is: Do camp and pastiche mix with alleged high seriousness? The main model here, as Hoffman has admitted, was the Strauss-Hofmannsthal Ariadne auf Naxos. But
the difference—aside from the very great one in quality—is that in Ariadne the drama and the vaudeville, though juxtaposed, never really blend, which is precisely the point: in the end, the high and the low do not mix, however effectively they offset each other. In Ghosts, everything gets slapped together: buffa and seria are the same thing in or out of drag; Figaro becomes a dancing girl, Bégearss turns into a puppeteer, Corigliano masquerades as Mozart or Strauss. An ascent to heaven and an escape in a hot-air balloon are the same hot air, but at least the Met can laugh all the way to the bank and justify itself with Samira’s “In every house there is a cesspool.”

John Simon was a distinguished critic and a regular contributor to The New Criterion.