

Fulljames clearly wanted to reframe an opera that, in performance, can easily lapse into cliché. There were no *Carmen* clichés here, but there was also no detectable fidelity to Bizet or Merimée, despite loud claims to the contrary. Christopher Cowell's clear-cut vernacular translation dispensed with the time-served dialogues and recitatives, and introduced acres of invented spoken text. The narrator/police detective, a part spoken with an authentic Glasgow accent, was onstage throughout, her interpolated exchanges with the accused tending to interrupt the flow rather than enhance it. There was not a whiff of Seville or Spain—the whole scenario took place in an airless interrogation room—and when Escamillo turned up in his toreador's outfit he looked like a costume supplier's mannequin. The Act 1 children's chorus was axed, several other scenes were dismembered, Micaëla emerged as a cipher. Fulljames seemed more interested in the tropes of a modern police state than with sexual obsession or women's choice. In short, this was a production for *Carmen* virgins, not traditionalists.

But, but, but ... *Carmen* has survived worse bowdlerizations, and this was pretty mild compared to most. Technically, the execution was top-notch—not least the quality of lighting (James Farncombe) and projections (Will Duke), which created an atmosphere alternately sunny and oppressive. The panelled set (Sarah Beaton) and mufti costuming (Christina Cunningham) were perfectly functional. Dane Lam and the orchestra laid a lively musical foundation. The chorus made a big impact in Act 4.

A front-rank cast might have carried the production across the barrier separating theatrical reality from suspension of disbelief, but charisma was in short supply. The only singer to emerge with reputation intact was Hye-Youn Lee: her exemplary tone, diction and phrasing made Micaëla's aria the musical highlight of the evening. Returning to the title role which she last sang here in 2015 (in starkly different surroundings), Justina Gringytė was the opposite of a free-spirited gypsy: a bit of a lady, in fact, tall and genteel, who seemed out of place in a tawdry crime drama. Perhaps Gringytė was discombobulated by the English text, but her covered tone muffled the expressive force of her music. Alok Kumar was the sturdy José, Phillip Rhodes a likeable Escamillo, and there were notable cameos from Colin Murray (Dancaire) and Lea Shaw (Mercédès). The non-singing Investigator was believably portrayed by Carmen Pieraccini.

ANDREW CLARK

Agrippina

HGO at Jacksons Lane Theatre, London, May 14

Cannily billed by HGO (formerly Hampstead Garden Opera) as 'the coronation that goes wrong', this *Agrippina* was conceived by the director Ashley Pearson not as a bejewelled extravaganza, but as slick business-casual power games on the 'campus' of a Silicon Valley corporation. Sorcha Corcoran's set took the form of a giant tablet computer, with icons and animated apps (designed by Douglas Baker) projected onto the horizontal surface of a large white platform and a curtain behind it. In practice, these were not always clearly visible from the front rows of the steeply raked auditorium, but the characters and action were handled so astutely that there was little doubt about the points being made.

As usual with HGO, the production was double cast with singers in the early stages of their careers. At this second performance the title role was taken by Anna-Luise

Wagner, who, as she manipulated proceedings with deceptively easy-going confidence, applied her ductile soprano caressingly and with considerable style to the empress's music and text. Set against her was the inscrutably poised Poppea of Lisa Dafydd, projecting her lines with charm, lucidity and a delicate vibrato. Caught between them was the intense Nerone of Phoebe Rayner, dressed in both trousers



HGO's 'Agrippina'

and a pleated skirt, her athletic high mezzo coppery and resonant. As Ottone, Eliran Kadussi complemented a silky, agile countertenor with easy physical assurance and a nice sense of irony, while Jacob Bettinelli, deploying his ample, dusky bass-baritone, took a more broadly comic approach as the fatuous Claudio. This was a cast of distinct vocal and scenic personalities, and Laurence Williams made a forthright, energetic Pallante, Dominic Mattos a coolly incisive Narciso, and Sonny Fielding—a tenor sounding here like a malleable baritone—a wry, biddable Lesbo. Appearing not just as a *dea*, but as a succulent-toned *diva ex machina*, Lydia Shariff stole the final scene with her Giunone. Thomas Payne conducted with exhilarating vitality and grace, and there was constant pleasure to be derived from the sonorities and precision of the HGO Antiqua Orchestra. YEHUDA SHAPIRO

La cambiale di matrimonio

Royal Academy of Music, London, May 16

It might just be possible to explore the themes of patriarchy, colonialism and sexual identity in Rossini's early, London-set one-acter *La cambiale di matrimonio*. Wisely, though a couple of hints were dropped (and regular interjections reminded us that 'americano' and 'canadese' are not synonymous), Sam Brown chose not to do so in his production for the Royal Academy of Music. The Susie Sainsbury Theatre was ideally scaled for the kind of updated *commedia dell'arte* he presented, with costumes by Teresa Poças and high-contrast lighting by Joshua Gadsby, in bold shades of sunflower yellow, crimson and black against the bare walls of the stage. The tone was caricatural and cynical, sometimes mechanistic, and the cast (the first of two appearing in the run of four performances) executed their routines like pros.

Two formidable baritones were pitted against each other—at one point, in a boxing match. As Tobias Mill, the heavy, avaricious father, Charles Cunliffe, a finalist at the 2022 Kathleen Ferrier Awards, sang with brooding concentration and took the comedy as seriously as he could; as Joseph Slook, the rich, guileless Canadian, Johannes Moore confirmed the impression he made as Falstaff in British Youth Opera's *Sir John in Love* last summer, combining an arrestingly powerful voice with an exuberant personality. Luiza Willert, a recent Susanna at the Academy, portrayed Mill's daughter Fanny with