

Opera

'The Golden Cockerel' in Brussels

2017 International Opera Awards shortlists

Allegro ma non troppo: Daniele Rustioni

Paul Kildea on the Britten-Pears letters

Nicholas Payne in Prague

John Joubert's operas



Belgium

Brussels

In December 2011 Alain Altinoglu made his debut at La Monnaie, conducting Laurent Pelly's production of Massenet's *Cendrillon*, previously seen in Santa Fe and London. Five years later, now the company's music director, the French conductor was reunited with Pelly for *The Golden Cockerel* at the Brussels company's temporary venue, the PALAIS DE LA MONNAIE (December 13).

The director's style was immediately apparent, in both the set (designed by Barbara de Limburg), a huge pile of coal topped by Dodon's enormous bed, which later morphed into an armoured tank, and the costumes (designed by Pelly) and hairstyles—the Astrologer, who initially poked his head out between the curtains of the stage, looked like a circus conjuror, while the boyars sported crested coiffures and there was a distinct air of steampunk about the soldiers' uniforms.

Even more typical of Pelly was the sense of comedy, the brilliant management of the chorus and the savvy direction of the principals. The characterization was sharp but not cruel, fresh but true to the spirit of the work. The only cause for reservation was the over-elaborate design for the second act—the massive metal frame of a kind of denuded horn of plenty, which formed an obstacle course for the Queen of Shemakha to negotiate as she simultaneously tackled her still-more-perilous Hymn to the Sun. As a consequence, Venera Gimadieva's coloratura became a little blurred around the edges and she resorted to some nudging up to notes, but she made a considerable theatrical impact, and, as with her *Violetta* at Glyndebourne in 2014, projected her sumptuous tone to great effect. Agnes Zwierno's Amelfa was somewhat short of amplitude, but the young Belgian soprano Sheva Tehoval exuded luminosity with her Cockerel, sung from the pit while an actress shook a tail feather onstage. The male singers were also impressive: Pavlo Hunka's ideally klutzy Dodon, the impeccable Princes of Alexey Dolgov and Konstantin Shushakov, and a virtuosic Astrologer in the form of Alexander Kravets.

The Orchestre de la Monnaie is regaining the colour it lost in recent years and Altinoglu led a performance notable for transparency and refinement, perhaps at the cost of some bite. He was clearly happy to be in the house, and gave unstintingly of himself, even taking to the piano during the ten minutes the curtain was down between Acts 2 and 3, when he accompanied the violinist Saténik Kourdoian in Fritz Kreisler's arrangement of themes from the opera, to which the duo added an introduction by Efrem Zimbalist.

NICOLAS BLANMONT