

## Melbourne

The Scottish building contractor David Mitchell is famed for having created two incomparable Australian monuments: the ROYAL EXHIBITION BUILDING in Melbourne; and his daughter Helen Porter Mitchell, better known as Nellie Melba. The breathtakingly cavernous, UNESCO-World-Heritage-listed Exhibition Building was constructed in just 18 months in order to house the 1880 Melbourne International Exhibition. In 1901 it held the first sitting of Australia's new federal parliament. This was the venue chosen by MELBOURNE OPERA for its magnificent new production of *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg*.

It has to be said that the building has never been a natural concert or opera venue. One of the several critics who raved about the first of Melba's farewell concerts there in December 1907 said as much, acknowledging that 'some of the unfavourably situated had to enlarge their ears with the aid of imagination'. Thankfully, in 2025, big ears were not required: the *Meistersinger* sound was, for the most part, clear, distinctive and well balanced. It helped, immeasurably, that Anthony Negus was in the pit. He conducted a vivid, persuasive and swift-flowing account of the score, but one that always carried a strong undercurrent of profound meaning and unabashed romanticism. The Melbourne Opera Orchestra (offstage instruments included) responded with beautiful playing, with fine lower strings and excellent horns. Any fluffs or smudges on the first night (February 16) had gone by the final performance (February 22).

As with Melbourne Opera's 2023 *Ring* in Bendigo, Negus and the director, Suzanne Chaundy, were again the linchpins of this *Meistersinger*. Chaundy's lively production was as engrossing as it was exuberant. Above all, it was funny. To hear the sound of laughter, thus completing the circuit between stage and audience, was in itself joyous. Here we were, the good people and burghers of Nuremberg and the worthy people of Melbourne, celebrating as one.

The building itself became an essential part of the performance. The wide stage, placed under the arches of the central towering dome, utilized a simple, skeletal set by Andrew Bailey that did not, and could not, compete with its lofty surroundings. Instead, the production seamlessly and ingeniously blended the two: an inspired idea that incorporated height and depth and matched set and costume colours with the pastel tones of the building. Chaundy cleverly deployed the building's offstage areas—for example, the side balconies for the congregation in Act 1 and as a patrol point for the Nightwatchman, and,

Warwick Fyfe and Lee Abrahmsen as Hans Sachs and Eva in Melbourne Opera's *Meistersinger*



in the final scene, a procession extending along the building's long central corridor up onto the stage. The subtle, shadowy changes of natural summer light beaming through the many windows took us from mid afternoon through twilight and into the night. Philip Lethlean's lighting also ensured a smooth transformation.

The cast could barely be faulted, even if a couple of the singers seemed vocally depleted by the final performance (who could blame them, with a punishing four *Meistersingers* in seven days?). The stage was dominated by Warwick Fyfe's Hans Sachs and Christopher Hillier's Beckmesser, both making role debuts, both assured and excellent throughout. They were equally strong and persuasive, never tiring. Fyfe was a dignified cobbler, his poetic soul always there behind his more durable exterior. Similarly, Hillier, in outrageous costume (the appropriately quirky and smartly respectful designs were by Karine Larché), never lost sight of the fact that Beckmesser, in spite of his pedantry, is at heart still a sensitive, creative man.

James Egglestone's Walther, perhaps with a tad less heft than usual in this arduous role, conveyed nobility and impetuosity in equal measure, delivering an ardent Prize Song. Robert Macfarlane's David had clarity and precision. Lee Abrahmsen sang Eva, another substantial Wagner role for this outstanding soprano; she coped admirably with the role's vocal range and her soprano had as much sunlight as streamed through the western windows. Likewise, Deborah Humble as Magdalene brought vivacity to this often underplayed part. Steven Gallop's genial, well-sung Pogner and Michael Lampard's expressively fastidious Kothner were distinctive. Praise, too, to the remaining Mastersingers: Henry Choo, Bradley Daley (a luxury to cast an erstwhile Siegfried as Zorn), Asher Reichman, Christopher Busietta, Darcy Carroll, Michael Honeyman, Peter Tregear and Alex Pokryshevsky, to the peripatetic Nightwatchman, Henry Shaw, the agile Apprentices and the 48-strong chorus.

With this *Meistersinger* Melbourne Opera has produced a real festival attraction. There were many things at which to marvel, not the least of which was the brilliant metamorphosis of a building only a decade or so younger than the opera itself into something almost human: not bricks and wood, but a structure with a heart and soul. This production belongs as naturally and as exclusively to this building as, say, *Parsifal* once did to Bayreuth. Speaking of which, *Parsifal* is the only remaining mature Wagner work yet to be staged by Melbourne Opera. I hope it's in the pipeline—and what finer, more obvious place for the *Bühnenweibfestspiel* than the Royal Exhibition Building? A shoo-in, as Hans Sachs might put it.

MICHAEL SHMITH

## AUSTRIA

### Vienna

Not everyone would have wanted to be in Federica Lombardi's shoes as the heroine in the STAATSOPER's new *Norma* (seen on March 3). The first night took place just a few days after the MUSIKTHEATER AN DER WIEN presented the same opera with a sensational Asmik Grigorian in the title part (seen on March 1). Most Viennese critics came out in favour of Grigorian. This 'confrontation of the divas' was entirely

