

## South Africa

### Cape Town

The admirable international organization UMCULO presented the premiere of *Comfort Ye* in the ARTSCAPE THEATRE on March 6, describing it as 'Musical theatre based on autobiographical texts written by young South African singers'. Headed by their indefatigable director Shirley Apthorp, Umculo is dedicated to social change in South Africa through music, and the performance involved a large cast of young people (the choir of Bloekombos Secondary School, trained by Siyabulela Sulelo) aided by a number of adult soloists. The aim was to create a work that was identifiably South African and that placed the spotlight on the South African situation as experienced by the choir members themselves. The concept and stage direction was by Robert Lehmeier and the musical direction by Warwick Stengards. To new music by Catherine Milliken were added various items from Handel's *Messiah* and *L'allegro, il penseroso ed il moderato*, thus creating a fascinating combination of Baroque and contemporary music. Erik Dippenaar conducted a neat little ten-piece orchestral ensemble from the harpsichord and piano.

The work tells the story of 24 hours in the lives of young people in a local community. Much of it highlighted the stressful conditions under which less privileged young Capetonians live every day. The piece inhabits a dark space of vicious gang violence, menacing dogs barking and ear-shattering gunshots; the bullying, corrupt police are ever present. Yet it also shows the commitment and deep-rooted aspirations of these disadvantaged youngsters as they sadly sing of their longing for a 'home'.

The talented and enthusiastic cast delivered some really moving and heart-rending choral singing. They were supported by more experienced soloists who made a sterling contribution to the production. The soprano Siyasanga Yonela Mbuyazwe and mezzo

#### ■ '*Comfort Ye*': Umculo's latest music theatre project in Cape Town



Bongiwe Nakani made strong impressions, and the expertise of the tenor Rheinald Tshepo Moagi and bass Najabulo Sifso Mthimkhulu added to the signal success of the evening. Nicholante Ngongoshe and Xolisa Kapakati gave deeply committed performances as the young couple who find themselves caught in the escalating violence and the final cathartic vortex.

BARRY SMITH

## Spain

### Barcelona

Tragedy struck the LICEU at the end of its run of performances of *Siegfried* when Maria Radner and Oleg Bryjak died in the Germanwings plane crash. They had been in the second cast; their Siegfried, Stefan Vinke, stood in at the last minute for an ill Lance Ryan on the opening night (March 11). Robert Carsen's production takes place in a desolate world (designs by Patrick Kinmonth, lighting by Manfred Voss), and this story of all-too-human passions unfolds with the perceptive touch of the Canadian director's best work (Eike Ecker was the revival director). Josep Pons favoured attention to detail over architectonic coherence, but his conducting was a clear improvement on last season's *Walküre*. Vinke's reliable and not unsubtle Siegfried was well matched with Irène Theorin's warm Brünnhilde, while Albert Dohmen's imposing Wanderer, Peter Bronder's frantic Mime, Jochen Schmeckenbecher's fine Alberich, Andreas Hörl's Fafner, Ewa Podleś's distinctive Erda and Cristina Toledo's Woodbird formed a well balanced cast.

The first production of the operatic year had been a double bill of Montsalvatge's *Una voce in off* and Poulenc's *La Voix humaine* (January 18) in an Almodóvar-esque production by Paco Azorín. In the Catalan composer's opera (sung in Italian), Angeles Blancas's dramatic skills compensated for some uneven vocalism. In the Poulenc, María Bayo as Elle sang with elegance without reaching the deepest levels of the piece. Placing the Orquestra Simfònica de Barcelona, well conducted by Pablo González, behind the set of the Poulenc was a mistake.

For real vocal excitement we had to wait for *Norma* (February 8), when Sondra Radvanovsky achieved a phenomenal success as Bellini's heroine. With a perfect control of her huge instrument, the American soprano left no facets of the priestess's character untouched. She was not alone, as Gregory Kunde's Pollione was a marvel of vocal security and bel canto style. Ekaterina Gubanova's Adalgisa was bland but nonetheless matched well with Radvanovsky in their duos, and Raymond Aceto was an effective Oroveso. Renato Palumbo opted for some slow tempos that underlined the beauties of Bellini's score. The production, directed by Kevin Newbury and first performed last year in San Francisco, was an inoffensive affair.

XAVIER CESTER

### Madrid

On February 24 the TEATRO REAL gave the premiere of *El Público* by Mauricio Sotelo. Andrés Ibañez's libretto is a magnificent adaptation of Federico Garcia Lorca's enigmatic play about 'the theatre of the future'. This is the Madrid-born Sotelo's fourth opera. Surreal language, Dalí-like costumes and a complex musical score are woven together with flamenco rhythms to form a work that fascinates throughout its two-hour duration.

The complex production was the work of an international team of 17 headed by Robert Castro. The first part was absurdly fanciful, emphasizing flamenco and vivid colours. The



■ The premiere of 'El Público' in Madrid, with (l. to r.) Josep Miquel Ramón, Thomas Tatz, José Antonio López and Jesús Méndez

second was intense: threatening percussion accompanied religious processions, with candles reflected in enormous mirrors. Masks, fans, a large screen, menacing spotlights—all were important elements in the telling of this story of frustrated homosexual feelings overpowered by social convention. Throughout, three horses represented erotic desire with their stamping hooves and swaying white manes. Thirty speakers were placed strategically in the theatre, to great effect.

The flamenco episode featured the splendid voices of Arcángel and Jesús Méndez along with Juan Manuel Cañizares (guitar), Agustín Diaserra (percussion) and Rubén Olmo (dancer). At the second performance, on February 26, they bonded with the brilliant Klangforum Wien orchestra under the conductor Pablo Heras-Casado. Like Lorca, Heras-Casado is a native of Granada; here his artistry was acute, his conducting authoritative but also sensitive. The vocal parts largely consisted of recitative and chanting, with occasional arias and duets. The large cast rose to the challenges. José Antonio López was the tormented theatre director Enrique, and Thomas Tatz sang his unmasked lover Gonzalo. The dividing force was Elena, powerfully interpreted by Gun-Brit Barkmin. Isabella Gaudí sang Julieta's demanding coloratura aria skilfully. When the curtain fell with a poetic violin solo, galloping horses and snow, we had experienced a true feast for the ears and eyes.

VICTORIA STAPELLS

## Sweden

### Stockholm

The ROYAL SWEDISH OPERA gave the long-awaited first Scandinavian performance of George Benjamin's *Written on Skin* (seen on February 18). The production had been