

The big supporting cast was equally solid, including Christopher Wolf (Frantz), Eric McConnell (Schlémil), Alexander Gmeinder (Andres/Cochénille/Pitichinaccio) and Yong-Hyun Kim (Crespel). Hats off to the chorus, as well. John Kasarda's bare-bones set functioned effectively, decorated simply with a spinet piano or a gauze-draped bed or a few striped Venetian poles. In a welcome return to the Wheeler pit, George Manahan led a top-notch orchestra that excelled in the shimmering introductions to each act.

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THE METROPOLITAN OPERA is the big gorilla among American opera companies, so its season opener must take pride of place in this report. But it was hardly the most notable operatic, or quasi-operatic, recent event.

The Met's gala opener on September 24 was *Samson et Dalila*, which may be hoary but is charming-hoary, too, and can be exciting and beautiful. There were two problems: the production and the cast.

Peter Gelb has a penchant for employing operatically inexperienced theatrical directors. Sometimes it works, but this time—with the team of Darko Tresnjak, director; Alexander Dodge, set designer; and Linda Cho, costumes—it did not. This was a big, static behemoth, like an old-fashioned Hollywood Biblical epic, the kind of thing the Met did decades ago when they had better singers. It was a long way from any kind of modern opera production, whether conceptual or decorative, radical or conservative. The Metropolitan Opera House may be big, but it needn't be intellectually vacant.

The set was full of steps and risers and walls, glitzy and pink. The handsomest piece of design was the gigantic split statue of the god Dagon in the final scene. But there wasn't much that poor Samson, even with his strength restored, could do with it. It could have tilted apart, but that would have just looked silly. Instead, he broke the feeble chain that bound his wrists and the curtain fell. Otherwise, it was pretty much stand and sing, along with Austin McCormick's sleazy choreography.

Dramatically, one might have hoped that Elīna Garanča could bring more seductive femininity to Dalila than some of her stentorian predecessors. She looked good, despite being saddled with a dull brown wig, but although she has stated her intention to move on to heavier mezzo roles, she seemed ill suited to this part. Some of the love music sounded sweet but elsewhere her limitations in the bottom half of her range were all too apparent. Roberto Alagna offered a functional Samson, acceptable in the heroic first act but increasingly troubled thereafter, capped by a squawked high B flat at the very end. He dropped out of several subsequent performances, perhaps a victim of the pervasive local cold and flu bugs. Laurent Naouri made a practised if worn-sounding High Priest, and the rest of the singers held up their end. Mark Elder's conducting sounded nicely rich, almost Wagnerian, but too often slow and slack—perhaps he was trying to favour his singers.

The best recent event came with *The Mile-Long Opera*, seen on October 5. This was a joint project by the architectural firm of Diller, Scofidio + Renfro and the composer David Lang. The firm designed the HIGH LINE, an elegant park along the elevated tracks of a disused New York Central Railroad spur line. Lang has always liked to push at the boundaries of what opera, or even music, can be. Sometimes he fails, as in his inaudible *whisper opera* or his profoundly tedious *the loser* (Lang eschews capital letters). But