

choreography also boasted a 'native' feel and Oliver Fenwick's evocative lighting took up the slack. Máire Flavin delivered a knowing Hanna with a fetching Irish brogue that rang true; her soprano was delightful, exquisitely so in her patriotic 'Vilja'. Quirijn de Lang's Danilo was a loveable roué, his baritone absolutely firm in the upper reaches even as he affected emotional nonchalance. Geoffrey Dolton gave a typically animated Baron Zeta, but injected pathos when discovering Valenciennes's dalliance. Her liaison with man-about-town Camille de Rosillon was more than usually poignant, with Amy Freston making good use of her dance training and Nicholas Watts an avid suitor; there was piquancy in their duets. Alex Otterburn and Alex Banfield slathered on the smarm with heavy Parisian accents as Cascada and St Brioche. Seven embassy types combined wittily in 'Cherchez les femmes', which was multiply encored. Others who stepped out of the chorus successfully included Dean Robinson's quizzical Kromov, subsuming the role of Njegus and turning any number of blind eyes to diplomatic howlers. Chorus ladies made more than credible grisettes, and six professionals took on the trickier dances. Martin André's flexible orchestra and willing chorus almost compensated for the glamour that was missing from the set.

MARTIN DREYER

## Yevgeny Onegin

### *Opera Loki at St Paul's Church, Covent Garden, London, September 29*

Opera Loki was formed 17 years ago by Jane Gray. It's a career-starting company that has put on performances in France and England, and many of its artists have moved on to working with UK opera companies. It wasn't hard to imagine Gray's cast of postgraduate singers evoking the spirit of the Moscow premiere of Tchaikovsky's 'lyric scenes', given by students in 1879, and she and her music director David Smith got round the scenes with chorus (the peasants bringing in the harvest, Tatyana's name-day party and the St Petersburg ball) with some elegant editing that didn't make you feel short-changed. Her staging, given in London's actors' church in the bulky shadow of the Royal Opera House, with period costumes and a few props, was intimate and Chekhovian. It showed off what good actors the leads were, as their characters were propelled from carefree youth to adult woes.

Kirsty McLean's Tatyana was assured both as gawky, self-aware teenager and confident princess. Her light soprano sounded made for Tchaikovsky's lyricism, and she had the emotional heft for an intense Letter Scene. Jonathan de Garis is blessed with the looks and bearing of a suave, supercilious Onegin, matched by his ultra-seductive baritone. He was very effective in turning the mood of Tatyana's party, but there was less evidence of internal collapse in the second half. Jack Roberts had everything you could want in Lensky, in particular his preposterous, unaffected romanticism and despair in the ardently sung monologue, and Lara Harvey delivered a flirtatious, sharply characterized Olga. With little in the way of distraction from the staging, the four leads sparked off each other with touching candour. Georgia Mae Bishop proved an astute comedian as a spirited Filippievna, and her strong mezzo projected the English translation with clarity; Helen Rotchell's Madame Larina caught the indolence of Russian rural life in the finely judged opening quartet; and Julian Debreuil sang Prince Gremin's aria with great authority. David Smith played the piano reduction with flair and feeling for atmosphere.

Coincidentally, the next opera I went to a few days later was, again, *Yevgeny Onegin*, in Falk Richter's self-important production at the Vienna Staatsoper. There's no doubt which staging got closer to the work.

PETER REED