

La Clemenza di Tito, Opéra national de Lorraine, Nancy, France – review

It's far from being Mozart's finest opera – but John Fulljames' staging does it proud

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Franco Fagioli as Sesto

Left on the shelf until it was rescued from oblivion for the Salzburg festival in 1949, Mozart's last opera has since been feted beyond the call of duty. It was written in haste to honour a commission, a mysterious reversion to stiff opera seria mode that feels like a rushed job. Despite some lovely

music, the plot line is absurd and characterisation is feeble and improbable, not a charge that could ever be levelled at Mozart's other mature works. Titus's clemency ends up looking like an exercise in dithering.

Lumbered with acres of recitatives, none of them written by Mozart, *Clemenza* can be a trial in the wrong hands. But John Fulljames' staging, a co-production with Opera North in Leeds, where it was unveiled last year, gives the recitatives the full treatment, injecting dramatic punch and moving the cast around with studied purpose. Fulljames cannot entirely paper over skin-deep characters but at least wards off the yawns. The chorus, which might have got in the way of this tense choreography, is dumped in side boxes, unseen but very much heard.

Conor Murphy's grey sets and black costumes conform to modern chic canons. We could be witnessing a power play in a multinational boardroom, not a bit of bother in imperial Rome. Visual monotony is staved off, but only just, by a cubist 3D video backdrop acting as a trompe-l'oeil.

Vocal monotony is never a threat. Everybody has come to hear countertenor sensation Franco Fagioli as Sesto, a role normally entrusted to a mezzo soprano. [Fagioli made his mark here in 2012 in Vinci's Artaserse](#), a baroque extravaganza featuring no fewer than five countertenors. His Sesto plunges to cavernous contralto territory before darting

above the stave to show off a luscious top register. Few can perform these acrobatics with such accuracy and no mezzo I have ever heard has pulled off the coloratura in Sesto's big aria "Parto, parto" with such ease. The downside is that this plummy, bottled-up tone inevitably comes at the expense of clear diction.

Another countertenor, Yuriy Mynenko, also heard in *Arteserse*, makes a big impression as Annio. Bernada Bobro's Servilia sings sweetly and Sabina Cvilak displays steely resolve as Vitellia. Bernard Richter's Tito too often forces his tenor off pitch but makes the character more credible than usual.

Countertenor bliss aside, the evening's other reward comes from Kazem Abdullah's superb, sensitively detailed conducting. Nancy's orchestra has never sounded better.



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