



# Critics Choice 2023

As the year draws to a close, Opera Now's critics look back and nominate their top operas from 2023

**Hattie Butterworth, Editor**  
**Glyndebourne Festival Opera**

**Poulenc** – *Dialogues des Carmélites*

A collection of Southern Rail cancellations, a shared taxi ride with some delightful strangers and running through the heat in our finery takes me back to the opening night of Glyndebourne's *Dialogues des Carmélites* in June. My first time at Glyndebourne was punctuated by what many agree was one of the greatest operatic achievements of the decade in Barrie Kosky's *Carmélites*.

**Hugh Morris**  
**Oscarsborg Operaen**

**Brøske & Meløy** – *Kommandanten*

In August, a friend dragged me along as a plus 1 to *Kommandanten* (*The Commander*), a new commission by Oslo's Oscarsborg Operaen from Trygve Brøske and Marianne Meløy that celebrated 25 years of the company. Across a whole afternoon and evening, the island of Oscarsborg (a coastal fortress in the Oslofjord) was transformed: first into a living museum with a theatrical walking tour and later, into the venue for wildly ambitious, sprawling opera. It was all in Norwegian with no translation, but it encapsulated so many of the things opera can be: ambitious, challenging, ludicrous, fun, and moving.

**Adrian Mourby**  
**Welsh National Opera**

**Bernstein** – *Candide*

In 25 years of reviewing for *Opera Now* I have never just written

the single word, 'superb' in my notebook. But that is the only honest, open-hearted response one can have James Bonas's production of *Candide* for Welsh National Opera. Pont's white on black animations took place on a chainmail curtain between the singers and the orchestra and made anything possible. Unlike many opera productions, this *Candide* left nothing to the imagination. You want a volcano exploding? You got it.

**Lauren McQuistin**  
**English National Opera**

**Britten** – *Peter Grimes*

It's been a while since I've seen an opera get people talking like ENO's production of Peter Grimes this year. It was an ever-relevant exploration, an opera with no clear-cut villain and victim, that explores how society punishes to protect itself. ENO's production was overwhelming, abrasive, brutal - and heart-breaking enough for the major questions the opera presents to be reckoned with.

**Susan Nickalls**  
**Lviv Opera**

**Verdi** – *La traviata*

Lviv Opera deserves a shout-out for continuing to put on productions while Ukraine is at war. Although Verdi's *La traviata* was fairly conventional, the performance itself was a powerful testament to the bravery of the company and audience, demonstrating the human need for art in times of crisis.



**Robert Thicknesse**  
**English National Opera**  
**Wagner** – *The Rheingold*

The belated *Rheingold* at ENO was my pick of the pack for this year: not only for confirming a company back on top form, but because it was such an ENO show, with director Richard Jones doing something entirely original, a bit sarcastic, and brilliantly penetrating, going to the heart of what the Ring might be about. Great cast, too - John Relyea as Wotan, Frederic Ballentine as bumptious Loge, Christine Rice the showstopping Erda, Leigh Melrose a terrifically unpleasant Alberich. Martyn Brabbins conducted with great assurance and pacing. It was also the funniest Rhinegold you could hope for...

**Andrew Mellor**  
**Royal Danish Opera**  
**Monteverdi** – *L'Orfeo*

Jetske Mijnsen's production of Monteverdi's *L'Orfeo* closed after one night in March 2020. Back three years later almost to the day, it seemed only to have grown in elegance, eloquence and shattering emotional power. Marc Mauillon's performance in the title role was magnetic but this show - from choreography (Lillian Stillwell) to the surging power of an unusually large Concerto Copenhagen under Lars Ulrik Mortensen - was all about the collective. It was impossible to see it in 2023 and not reflect on what we'd all been through these last three years

**Fiona Hook**  
**Théâtre des Champs-Élysées**  
**Stravinsky** – *Le Rossignol* | **Poulenc** – *Les Mamelles de Tirésias*

This unlikely pairing on every level, from the odd setting in the back and front of a gay club, to Sabine Devieille's tender pianissimi as the Nightingale. The joyously colourful sets and costumes, and the shifting sound palette as *Les Siècles*, under François-Xavier Roth's supple direction, swapped the instruments of 1914 for later versions. *Le Rossignol* was beautiful and moving, *Mamelles* with the myriad comic touches never obscuring its serious message, was totally absorbing. I wanted to see it again. At once!

**Robert Levine**  
**Metropolitan Opera**  
**Jake Heggie** – *Dead Man Walking*

'Opera must make people weep, shudder and die,' wrote Vincenzo Bellini, but that sort of cathartic experience is very, very rare. The

Metropolitan opened its 2023-2024 season with the company premiere of Jake Heggie's and Terence McNally's *Dead Man Walking*. The complex story of a murderer's redemption with the guidance and love of a nun was riveting. Ian von Hove's harsh production underscored the violence and chill of prison while his direction of the characters was filled with sensitivity. Ryan McKinny offered a star turn as the penitent killer and Joyce DiDonato offered another in a series of career triumphs as Sister Helen.

**Thomas May**  
**San Francisco Opera**

**Strauss** – *Die Frau ohne Schatten*  
 San Francisco Opera capped its centenary season with a splendid staging of David Hockney's whimsically surreal production of *Die Frau ohne Schatten* from the 1990s. Camilla Nylund as the Empress, Nina Stemme and Johan Reuter portraying the troubled human couple and Linda Watson as a particularly chilling Nurse. Donald Runnicles guided the way through the labyrinthine score with clarity and insight, while the production compassionately illuminated the many-layered, symbolic journey and psychology revelations traced by Hofmannsthal's libretto.

**Anthony Ogus**  
**Hanover Staatsoper**

**Rimsky-Korsakov** – *The Tale of Tsar Saltan*  
 An imaginative, and technically brilliant modern production which still had a fairy-tale character. Led by James Hendry, the performance captured all the facets of RK's magical score and there were impressive vocal characterisations from, particularly, Barno Ismatullaeva as the Tsarina and José Simerilla Romero as her son. A captivating evening of musical theatre.

**Claire Jackson**  
**Irish National Opera**

**Brian Irvine** – *Least Like the Other*  
 Irish National Opera's production of *Least Like the Other* set the bar high for the year when it opened at the Linbury Theatre in January - a standard that was not eclipsed over the following months. Composer Brian Irvine and director Netia Jones's 2019 opera uses source material from newspaper reports, letters and biographies to create a patchwork stage piece that reveals the Kennedy family's questionable treatment of JFK's sister Rosemary, who was lobotomised, sent away and erased from history. Soprano Amy Ní Fhearraigh dazzled throughout.

**David Patrick Stearns****Teatro Nuovo****Donizetti – *Poliuto***

A staged production? A concert? Who cares when Donizetti's long-forgotten 1848 *Poliuto* rises again with good music, vital theatricality and the kind of star showcase that, at Will Crutchfield's Teatro Nuovo performance at Lincoln Center's Rose Theater, assured that Argentinian tenor Santiago Ballerini return engagements in New York. In this outing, the pit orchestra was historically authentic and slide projections set the scene for the Romans-in-Armenia plot, leaving the expansive stage free for him to command with his considerable talent.

**Yukiko Kishinami****New National Theatre Tokyo****Verdi – *Rigoletto***

The new production of *Rigoletto* at the New National Theatre in May, directed by Emilio Sagi and conducted by Maurizio Benini, was a big operatic treat. Roberto Frontali shone in the title role. His portrayal of the doomed jester reminded me that this Verdi opera is not only about great arias, but goes much deeper into the journey and tragedy of an ill-fated man. And the superb Iván Ayón Rivas as the Duke was a bonus!

**Helena Matheopoulos****Greek National Opera****Bartók – *Duke Bluebeard's Castle***

This production, by the young Greek Director Themelis Glynatsis, was magical: visually stunning and dramatically probing in a way that heightened the mesmerising power of this wonderful work. The evocative and highly original set, by the distinguished British designer Leslie Travers, was itself a protagonist in this vintage production by heightening the sense of mystery and anticipation that permeates this work. Simple, modern-day costumes highlighted its timelessness.

**Colin Clarke****Volksoper Vienna****Moritz Eggert – *Die letzte Verschwörung***

The World Premiere of Moritz Eggert's *Die letzte Verschwörung* (The Last Conspiracy) shone at the Volksoper Vienna in March. Quixotic, funny, sophisticated, apocalyptic, surreal, absurdist and yet oh-so-real, it is all of these things (and more). It was presented in a brilliant staging by Lotte de Beer, the recently appointed director at the Volksoper. Rebecca Nielsen, in particular, offered a stunning performance.

**Karyl Charna Lynn****Israeli Opera****Yonathan Cnaan – *Theodor***

The World Premiere of *Theodor* involved you emotionally, intellectually, and spiritually with effective singing, convincing acting, taut libretto, and intuitive, and haunting music. The production, told in parallel realities, was brought to life with a kaleidoscope of sounds engulfing a wide spectrum that created a broad palette of colours and textures. The vividly contrasting scenes from a stark Paris winter street, shadowed in dark hues juxtaposed to a verdant beer garden bathed in warm colours to the opulent curtains and crystal chandeliers of the Viennese opera house combined with a cast that inhabited their characters made this my 2023 standout production.

**Francis Muzzu****Paris Opéra****Thomas – *Hamlet***

A nineteenth century French rarity, some great singing, an arresting production, a soprano who climbed the walls, comfy seats – what's not to like? *Hamlet* at the Opéra Bastille showcased Ambroise Thomas's elaborate score under the sensitive baton of Pierre Dumoussaud, and an outstanding cast hit the heights. Ludovic Tézier in the title role gave a master class in French style, Lisette Oropesa lived and died Ophélie with astonishing technique worthy of legendary divas of yore, and Eve-Maud Hubeaux flung her mezzo out into the vast auditorium as Gertrude. Krzysztof Warlikowski's complex production was elegant to the eye and challenging to the mind, roller-coasting between clarity and opacity.

**George Hall****Scottish Opera****Puccini – *Il trittico***

In March Scottish Opera presented the first complete, fully professional staging of Puccini's *Il trittico* north of the border since 1957. Charles Edwards' hyper-realistic sets, Sir David McVicar's riveting productions, Stuart Stratford's outstanding conducting and three wonderful casts made this a genuine operatic treat. Each of the three very different segments of the *Triptych* – the dark thriller *Il tabarro*, the desperately moving *Suor Angelica*, and the exceptionally mordant comedy *Gianni Schicchi* – went down a treat. Co-producers Welsh National Opera take over the show in June 2024, when Carlo Rizzi conducts three largely new casts. **ON**