

Between the sacred and the sensual

Penetrating portraits and witty prints illustrate the full scope of the Northern Renaissance

VISUAL ARTS

The Northern Renaissance: Dürer to Holbein

Queen's Gallery, Edinburgh

Richard Cork

The glowing intensity of Albrecht Dürer's painting shows why he was considered the most influential artist of the Northern Renaissance. Take his picture of Burkhard of Speyer, one of the highlights of this powerful survey of Northern Renaissance images in the Royal Collection.

Executed in Venice, where Dürer lived between 1505 and 1506, it portrays a man who may have been a chaplain attached to the German church of San Bartolommeo. The artist's brush incisively delineates his prominent nose, compressed lips and narrowed eyes. Alongside this puritanical toughness, though, Burkhard's sensuous golden hair suggests another side of his personality. It also proves how much Dürer learnt from the hedonism of Venetian colour.

But the show also emphasises that Dürer won much of his international fame through printmaking. His virtuoso engravings and woodcuts were widely disseminated and studied, especially his 1498 book of apocalyptic images, which chimed with the popular belief that the world would end in 1500. But he was equally impressive when scrutinising animals. His penetrating ink drawing of a lithe greyhound was used as a model for a dog in his engraving of St Eustace, the Roman general whose conversion to Christianity supposedly occurred when he was out hunting and discovered a Crucifixion nestling in a stag's antlers.

Perhaps his wittiest print is "The Bath House", where men are shown holding flowers, chatting and playing music. The obese figure quaffing his beer is a cheeky portrait of Dürer's friend Willibald Pirckheimer, while the leering man who positions his groin suggestively close to a water pipe is the artist himself.

Erotic amusement can likewise be found in Lucas Cranach the Elder's painting "Apollo and Diana". Acquired in 1844 by Prince Albert, who enriched the Royal Collection with many rare Renaissance masters, this exceptional panel shows the sun



god Apollo shooting an arrow. His dynamism is contrasted with his twin sister Diana, associated with hunting and chastity. But the impish Cranach ensures that the naked goddess sits seductively on a stag's well-groomed back, her tresses curling shamelessly around the antlers.

Sexual references abound in Northern Renaissance art. Cranach's painting of Lucretia, also bought by Prince Albert in 1844, should be a tragic image of a suicidal woman shamed by her loss of honour. Yet Cranach focuses provocatively on the moment when Lucretia is about to plunge a pristine dagger into her bared, ample breast.

In Jan Provoost's "Triptych: The

Virgin and Child with Saints and Donors", it is the Virgin Mary's breast that is on show. Based in Antwerp and Bruges, Provoost was so modest that he never signed his work. Yet he has no qualms about showing the Virgin as she presses her right breast to direct milk towards an ardent St Bernard gazing up at her nearby. He was, legend has it, praying before a statue of the Virgin when drops of milk fell from the statue's breast on to his lips.

Physical gratification carries a cost. At first, Jan Gossaert's monumental "Adam and Eve" seem to rejoice in their well-developed bodies, flaunted in the foreground of his painting. Gossaert learnt a great deal when he

left his native Netherlands and visited Rome, avidly studying antique sculpture. But as well as expertly depicting Adam's musculature, he makes sure we can see the fateful bite-mark in the apple clutched by Eve. Adam gazes at her with frowning anguish, lodging a finger in his mouth as if still tasting the fruit in disbelief.

Another masterly Gossaert here is his poignant portrait of the three little children of the exiled Christian II of Denmark. Their mother died at the beginning of 1526, the year when this panel was painted. Their fine mourning costumes cannot offset the sorrow on their blanched faces.

François Clouet also depicts bereavement in his portrait of the adolescent Mary, Queen of Scots. Painted around 1560-61, its subject had suffered the loss of her husband, mother and father-in-law in a traumatic 18-month period. Hence Mary's bleached, phantom-like features, heightened by her white mourning dress. But she still looks determined, calculating and resilient, caught by an artist shrewd enough to define Mary's stubborn defiance.

Clouet's contemporary, Hans Holbein the Younger, is represented by some masterly portraits. Eager to establish his reputation at the English court, the young painter from Basel must have been aware of the need to please his new patrons. Thus Derich Born, only 23 when Holbein painted him as a London-based merchant from Cologne, looks supremely poised and confident, resting one firm hand on another and leaning on a notably solid parapet. The inscription below reads: "If you added a voice, this would be Derich his very self. You would be in doubt whether the painter or his father made him."

All the same, Holbein was no mere flatterer. His drawing of Sir Richard Southwell reveals a man notorious for his ruthlessness, even disclosing the scars on Southwell's neck. As for Sir John Gossalve, he looks shifty enough to be fearful that his lucrative misdeeds while overseeing the textile trade might, at any instant, be found out. Portraits as penetrating as these persuade us that Holbein was brave enough to take risks and tell the pictorial truth.

Until January 15, www.royalcollection.org.uk

DANCE

Anna Karenina
Royal Opera House, London
★★★★☆

Clement Crisp

Latest arrival in the Mariinsky Ballet's London repertory is Alexey Ratmanský's *Anna Karenina*. It proposes hallucinatory action, exceptional decoration and an energetic score by Rodion Shchedrin composed for an earlier realisation of Tolstoy's novel by his wife, Maya Plisetskaya.

What Ratmanský's two acts offer is a spectre's view of the tragedy, a drama played by unquiet ghosts, narrative as illusion and allusion. I found the work fascinating, confusing, a tale told through hints and fragments of behaviour, and ultimately unsatisfactory.

This is not the Russian way, and certainly not Ratmanský's: several of his other big works – *Bolt*, *The Bright Stream*, *The Flames of Paris*, *The Little Humpbacked Horse* – have reclaimed and reshaped earlier Soviet *dramballets* on uncompromising and skilled terms.

Ratmanský's manner here is surprisingly academic for so emotional a tale, and a key to his staging is in the production's swiftly cinematic means of identifying location through scrim, projections and brilliantly achieved feats of stage legerdemain: interiors of grand households evoked through a piece of furniture; costuming shown as gauzy, impalpable, bleached of colour.

It is with these veristic but fundamentally unreal appearances and settings (superbly designed by Mikael Melbye) that a filleted account of Tolstoy's narrative is played out in short, allusive and sometimes un-nourishing scenes, the action shifting and melting with a film camera's speed. Do we, at the last, really care about Diana Vishneva's Anna, or Islom Baimuradov as Karenin, or Yuri Smekalov as Vronsky, her lover?

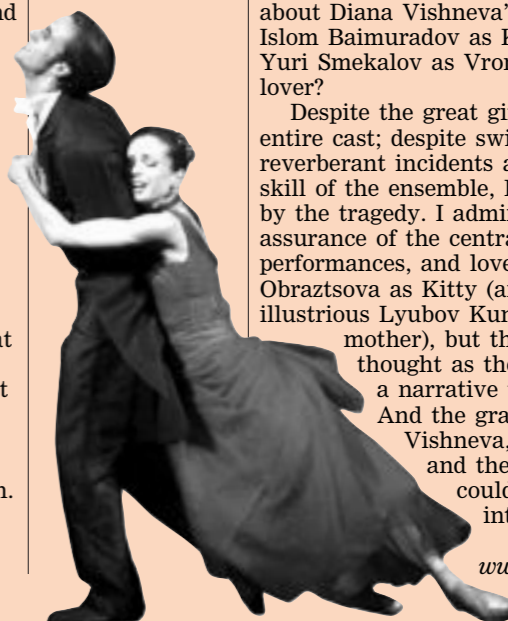
Despite the great gifts of the entire cast; despite swift and reverberant incidents and the sheer skill of the ensemble, I was unmoved by the tragedy. I admired the assurance of the central performances, and loved Yevgenia Obraztsova as Kitty (and the illustrious Lyubov Kunakova as her mother), but this was, I thought as the ballet ended, a narrative told by ghosts.

And the grand artistry of Vishneva, Smekalov and their colleagues could not flesh it into life.

www.roh.org.uk

Perfect poise: 'Derich Born' (1533) by Hans Holbein the Younger; below, Diana Vishneva and Konstantin Zverev in Alexey Ratmanský's 'Anna Karenina'

Royal Collection
Natasha Razina



Digital wizardry and star power

CLASSICAL MUSIC

Cabrillo Festival

Civic Auditorium, Santa Cruz

★★★★☆

Allan Ulrich

With the admonishment that "I think we can let this go now", Marin Alsop banished the emissaries bearing gushing tributes on the 20th anniversary of her bow as director of this contemporary music celebration and, with a flourish of her baton, plunged into the future. This two-week project, born 49 years ago in a town noted for its superb surfing opportunities, remains Northern California's most provocative summertime musical event.

Not surprisingly, a feeling of occasion dominated as the maestra led her 67-member orchestra heroically through a pair of ambitious programmes. Alsop believes that significant works should not wither after their premieres. On Saturday, she introduced this coast to the compelling Concerto for Piano by Tehran-born Behzad Ranjbaran, whose monumental orchestral rhetoric and introduction of ancient Persian scales and instruments frame a piano contribution comprised of five extended cadenzas. The concerto's dedicatee, Jean-Yves Thibaudet, contributed his undeniable star power to the festival with a performance notable for its digital wizardry and masterful tonal colouration.

From Japan, Alsop imported Shuko Mizuno's *Natsu* (*Summer*), a 20-minute symphonic poem veering between serene string harmonies and take-no-prisoners dissonant brass assaults that suggested an adroit

channelling of Bernard Herrmann and American jazz. Australia's Elena Kats-Chernin furnished the US premiere of *Re-Collecting ASTORoids*, a genial, if overextended tribute to Argentine tango master, Astor Piazzolla, that, for all its charm and invention, made one long to hear the source of her inspiration. Dance companies may be attracted to the piece.

Alsop's programming philosophy is consistent. She remains loyal to her musical friends, inviting listeners here to chart milestones in significant careers. On Friday, James MacMillan's Piano Concerto No. 3 (*The Mysteries of Light*) arrived four



Jean-Yves Thibaudet and Marin Alsop

months after its introduction in Minneapolis. Inspired by the five "Luminous Mysteries" added to the rosary by Pope John Paul II, this is a work guided by abiding faith. A sampling of *cantus firmus*, a stirring chorale and a bit of a Scottish folk tune suggest a musical autobiography. Yet the mood throughout is enraptured, suggesting Messiaen for many. Again, Thibaudet's contribution, dazzling in all respects, propelled the performance. Alsop has commissioned a symphony from the Scots composer for the festival's 50th anniversary.

Mason Bates conjured an audience pleaser in *Desert Transport*, a ravishing account of a helicopter expedition over the Arizona landscape that testifies to this young composer's command of orchestral sonorities, marred only by a recorded Pima Indian chant that approaches kitsch. Christopher Rouse, an Alsop favourite, introduced his *Odná Zhizn* (*A Life*), but the piece is dogged by so many personal references that it leaves the listener abandoned in its dense harmonies.

For this special year, five composers furnished "nightcaps", epigrammatic essays dedicated to Alsop. In *Black and White Scherzo*, Philip Glass recycled familiar rhythmic patterns, twisting them into a Latin dance beat. Mark Adamo offered the fluttering *Prepositions and the Names of Fish*. John Corigliano struck the right note with the sweet, sentimental *Cabrillo Lullaby*. It was the least they could do for a conductor who has made their music her mission.

The festival continues until August 14. www.cabrillomusic.org

CLASSICAL MUSIC

The Fifth Continent

Collegiate Church, Salzburg

★★★★☆

Shirley Apthorp

Like Mozart, Claude Vivier died when he was only in his mid-30s. And though the Canadian composer, who was murdered in his Paris apartment 28 years ago, wrote considerably less music than his Austrian forebear, he left enough to make an impact.

Posterity is only beginning to get its head around Vivier's legacy. The Montreal-born orphan with a metaphysical bent and a taste for spectralism studied with Stockhausen and travelled through Asia. His meditative, quirky sound-world was constantly evolving.

In Salzburg, the Fifth Continent concert series provides a healthy alternative to the growing

conservatism of mainstream festival programming. A pet project of interim intendant Markus Hinterhäuser, it is a glimpse of how interesting the Salzburg Festival could have become if the powers-that-be had not appointed arch-conservative Austrian Alexander Pereira to run it from next year.

A concert of Vivier's music for voice and percussion in Salzburg's decaying, baroque Collegiate Church provided a still point amid this week's festival rough-and-tumble. Percussionist Christian Dierstein opened the evening with a poised, reflective account of *Cinq chansons pour percussion* (1980), in which five stages of life are described with gamelan-inspired gongs. Vivier's score plays with ritual, overtones, momentum and melody, but keeps a thoughtful coherence throughout.

In *Journal*, Dierstein was joined by the Parisian Solistes XXI for a four-part voyage through the stages of

life. Vivier's cheerfully chaotic libretto romps through multilingual quotes from Lewis Carroll, Novalis, Mayakovsky and the Requiem Mass, and takes the listener consolingly past death to a luminous afterlife. Under the direction of Rachid Safir, the ensemble gave a performance that had just the right balance of theatricality, solemn ritual, whimsy and grace. Their flawless intonation was a pleasure.

Salzburg's Collegiate Church was full for every one of Hinterhäuser's adventurous Fifth Continent concerts. The atmosphere of rapt concentration is a constant throughout the series, commensurate with the reputation of the performers, who represent a who's who of today's new music elite. It can only be hoped that Salzburg will keep investing in such excursions.

The festival continues until August 30. www.salzburgerfestspiele.at

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