

## Postscript

From the *New York Times*: November 3rd 1991

Lunar Explorations

*Norma*, Metropolitan Opera House; November 1st, 4th, 9th;

Fischel; Han, Cinelli, Buonassisi, di Gregorio.

reviewed by Giles Mathews.

Mr Scott Milberg's new production of *Norma* opened at the Met on Friday night, and no-one who was there will ever feel the same—about Bellini's masterpiece; about bel canto; about the dramatic power of the human voice; nor even about the moon.

With two strong soprano roles, this piece has often in the past served as an arena for dueling divas. There was none of that this evening. Miss Buonassisi carried off the mezzo part with her usual flawless grace, and controlled her material, and our emotions, completely; but she was wise enough to know that, even in her solo arias, she could aspire to be nothing more tonight than decoration and support for what this reviewer—to his own delighted amazement—is now willing to declare the greatest dramatic soprano voice of our age.

Fears that Miss Margaret Han's various professional and personal problems and her long absence from the stage might have diminished her talent have proven wonderfully, miraculously misplaced. She is, in fact, at the height of her powers, both vocal and dramatic. She captured the

stage from the moment of her first appearance. Every gesture, every lift of the head, brought a sigh from the audience. But, oh, that voice!

Norma has of course the advantage of leading off her role with one of the most sublime and demanding arias in the bel canto repertoire: “Casta Diva”, the song to the moon—Chaste Goddess. Miss Han seized this advantage with both hands and rode it up to Heaven, her audience hanging on for dear life as the Earth and all earthly things dwindled below us. The moon herself is actually invisible in Mr Milberg’s production, her presence—somewhere up in the flies—conveyed by artifices of lighting. This is as well: there was nothing to take our eyes from that pale, diminutive figure on stage, filling the great hall with her gift, her marvelous thrilling celestial gift.

It is a ticklish thing, for a critic to speak of greatness. One may be carried away by a single performance. A singer who is merely first-class may get lucky with role, with conductor, with audience and setting. What we see and hear must always be weighed—soberly, carefully—and located properly in the tradition. Yet tradition is a living thing, capable of being transcended; and Miss Han has transcended it, she has renewed it.

This reviewer has seen them all: Tebaldi, Scotto, Callas, Bacon. As an opera-struck adolescent, nearly sixty years ago, I saw *Lucia* performed at Covent Garden by Amelita Galli-Curci, the singer with whom Miss Han has most often been compared—with whom I have, indeed, compared her myself in the past. I am bound to say now that the comparison fails. Miss Han has Galli-Curci’s high notes and legato, but her range goes all the way down into the chest register with no perceptible loss of power or control, and of course her voice is far larger than Galli-Curci’s. She is, in addition, a stage presence of quite disconcerting force. As certain dancers are able to convey the illusion of hanging suspended in the air during a jeté, the moment when Miss Han lifted up her arms to address the Chaste Goddess seemed to arrest time. As we waited for those first notes, the air in that huge space was near-crystalline with tension. And the notes, when they came, stilled the breath and froze the blood. At the conclusion of the largo, as the last words (“Spread over the earth that peace / Which you cause to reign in Heaven”) passed from astounding actuality to cherished

remembrance, there was a long instant of awed silence, while four thousand souls absorbed the astonishing, contradictory facts of their own insignificance and immortality. Then, pandemonium.

The Met has always been reputed one of the more staid opera houses, so far as displays of audience enthusiasm go. Not this night. Jowly old Wall Street mastodons, cynical victors of a thousand Mergers and Acquisitions, were skipping up and down like schoolboys at a ball game, applauding with their hands in the air, heads thrown back, tears running down their cheeks. Dowagers in diamonds, emaciated from decades of dieting and exercise, enervated by divorce, dinner parties and Modern Art, their faces lifted so often they could barely speak, were up on tip-toe shrieking *Brava! Brava! Brava!* People were throwing things in the air—I don't know what—programs, handkerchiefs, corsages, articles of clothing. Governor O'Driscoll could be seen hanging out of his box at an angle that must have induced terror in his security detail, blowing extravagant kisses at the diva. On stage the druids, priestesses and warriors were applauding with the rest of us, Cinelli (a first-rate Pollione, as if it mattered—oh, and Fischel was superb, the sets magnificent, and so on) wearing a huge grin on his round Italian mug as he nodded, nodded, nodded his understanding that he was a witness to glory this night. It seemed for a moment that he was going to step forward and embrace Miss Han, and perhaps he planned to, but wisely thought better of it. One does not embrace Divinity.

Fischel was standing on his podium “breathless” (by his own description, to this reviewer afterwards), arms hanging limp at his sides, but the orchestra—the *orchestra!*—were as unhinged as the rest of us, hands upraised, clapping, waving their bows, their sheet music, anything they could grab. It was mass hysteria, and it went on for *twenty-two minutes* by my watch. It is very likely that it only stopped then because we wanted to know what that voice would do with the cabaletta. Answer: a further miracle, another wild ovation. By the time we reached “Qual cor tradisti”, all present in the house were in a state of physical and esthetic exhaustion; but we all knew we were privileged to be alive and in such a place on such a night. That voice, that moonvoice soaring in moonsong, had reached everyone, caught and held every heart in the house, cutting

through all with the argentine clarity of moonlight, cutting so deep into human nature it seemed to have cut clean through, to Nature herself. This was mastery: this was perfection: this was the divine revelation of Art: yes, this was greatness. *Brava! Brava! Brava!* You will have to ask someone else about curtain calls—I lost count.

Seven years ago I attended one of Miss Han's first appearances (I think it was actually her very first appearance) in New York. I wrote then in this space that she was a sweet nightingale who just possibly might mature into an operatic eagle. Well, ladies and gentlemen: the eagle has landed.