

MAVRA & PIERROT LUNAIRE: PRESS RESPONSES

Royal Opera House, Covent Garden (2022)

anthony-almeida.com

THE GUARDIAN | Tim Ashley

★★★★

The Royal Opera's unusual pairing of two modernist works boasts an outstanding lead in Alexandra Lowe as Pierrot Lunaire, and plenty of imaginative touches elsewhere

The Royal Opera's Jette Parker Young Artists have opted for modernism for their first post-lockdown production, with a double bill of Stravinsky's *Mavra* and Schoenberg's *Pierrot Lunaire*, conducted by Michael Papadopoulos and directed by Anthony Almeida. It's an unusual pairing. Stravinsky's 1922 comedy, about a soldier cross-dressing in order to gain employment as a maid to his girlfriend's mother, remains something of a rarity. Nowadays, meanwhile, we would usually expect to encounter Schoenberg's moonstruck Pierrot in the concert hall rather than the theatre, though we should not forget that the work was originally a cabaret piece and later became a ballet, choreographed by Glen Tetley.

What links them, as Almeida's staging makes clear, are ideas about gender and identity. Drag permits Vasily access to a world his masculinity denies him. Tradition, meanwhile, assigns the role of Pierrot to a woman, even though Schoenberg's protagonist is male and the gender of the performer is undesignated in the score. Consequently what we first see, during the overture to *Mavra*, is Alexandra Lowe's Pierrot discarding women's clothes to become a Dietrich-like androgyne, while Egor Zhuravskii's Vasily experiments with trying on *Mavra*'s wig.

A set of gaudily papered walls, with an enormous light hanging from the ceiling, meanwhile, also serves both works. Almeida's approach to *Mavra* is vaguely absurdist, as bin bags pile up like Ionesco's chairs in the absence of a maid, and Parasha (April Koyejo-Audiger) looks on in disbelief as her preposterous, perfectionist Mother (Sarah Pring) makes and discards endless blanchmanges, until Zhuravskii – looking terrific in his maid's outfit – arrives to enliven the proceedings. In the Schoenberg, meanwhile, where Almeida is much more assured, the ceiling light becomes the moon and the walls slowly disappear as Pierrot yields to fantasy and hallucination. The characters from *Mavra* become shadowy figures in the surrounding darkness, and the flautist from the instrumental ensemble materialises on stage and hovers round Lowe like a mysterious lover.

Lowe gives a sensational, career-making performance here, pushing herself to her vocal limits in order to realise the expressive extremes of Schoenberg's Sprechstimme. Zhuravskii, a singer to watch on this showing, dominates *Mavra* with his supple, elegant tenor. Koyejo-Audiger sounds good as Parasha, her warm tone contrasting with Idunnu Münch's brighter voice as the busybody Neighbour.

Papadopoulos's conducting in *Mavra* is crisp if occasionally heavy-footed, and he seems more comfortable in Schoenberg, where the Britten Sinfonia play wonderfully well for him. As a whole, not all of it works, though *Pierrot Lunaire* is often outstanding.

THE TELEGRAPH | Nicholas Kenyon

★★★★

Comedy, melodrama and exceptional singing: Up-and-coming stars perform an entertaining Stravinsky/Schoenberg double bill

Stravinsky's half-hour parody comic opera *Mavra* was one of his failures. He thought it up in London while at the Savoy Hotel in 1921, and it was premiered in Paris to an uncomprehending, baffled audience. One of the few people who appreciated its craft was the composer Poulenc. Yet it has a witty libretto based on a Pushkin tale about a family looking for a new cook, cleverly versified by Diaghilev associate Boris Kochno.

It's rarely performed these days, though I remember it in the London Sinfonietta's survey of all Stravinsky's work a generation ago, and so made an ideal subject for revival by the Royal Opera's enterprising Jette Parker Young Artists Programme, in a double bill with Schoenberg's *Pierrot Lunaire*.

We are supposed to hear in it echoes of the native tradition of Glinka and Tchaikovsky, but that may just be the composer trying to put us off the scent and confuse his audience. It sounds more directly derived from the sharp-edged language of Stravinsky's *Les Noces* and the *Octet*, especially as for this staging at the Linbury Theatre with its tiny pit, the score was very effectively reduced for a chamber ensemble by Paul Phillips.

There are only four characters, who poke fun at many situations in the comic opera genre. In order to advance their love, Parasha and the hussar Vasily hatch a plot for Vasily to appear as the new cook *Mavra*. In Rosanna Vize's skittish designs, this is all accomplished in a kitchen filled with *blancmanges* and piled up, discarded rubbish bags, while April Koyejo-Audiger as the ardent Parasha in excellent voice, and Egor Zhuravskii as the awkwardly costumed Vasily duet mock-rhapsodically.

The highly experienced Sarah Pring as Mother waxes nostalgic about their last "perfect" cook, while Idunnu Münch as Neighbour muses aptly on the difficulty of finding a suitably modest replacement "when the cost of living climbs so quickly". So far, so funny, and Anthony Almeida's direction makes the most of the latent surrealism in the story while not exactly aiding perspicuity.

The plot collapses when the new maid *Mavra* is caught having a shave, in this case aided by the vast amounts of cream ladled onto the *blancmanges*. Yes, it's totally mad, but somehow in tune with Stravinsky's brittle score.

There is a compelling contrast between the early 20th-century composers Schoenberg and Stravinsky. The former was the would-be creator of a new tradition of composition with 12 notes, developing as he hoped a single line of new music, while the latter was the magpie-like adopter of all styles from all sorts of music past and present, creating an open, flexible approach to tradition.

Stravinsky won that battle for the future, but, along the way, Schoenberg created some historic scores, among which the solo song-cycle *Pierrot Lunaire* stands as a classic. Its 21 songs demand a concentrated virtuosity from the soloist, combining singing with speech and half-sung poetry of extreme precision and subtlety.

It can be done coolly, detached, but here Almeida encouraged Alexandra Lowe into a powerful, no-holds-barred performance. The characters from *Mavra* appeared as shadowy figures around a swirling light that echoed *Pierrot's* relationship with the moon.

For one song, the flute from the ensemble joined Lowe on stage; for another, she jumped down into the pit – it was an amazing display, coolly controlled by Michael Papadopoulos, who conducted both works with the outstanding players of the Britten Sinfonia, especially the precision pianist Michael Sikich.

THE STAGE | George Hall

★★★★

Artful: Intriguing double bill that demonstrates the talents of the Royal Opera's Jette Parker Young Artists

This unusual Linbury double bill forms part of the celebrations for the 20th anniversary of the Jette Parker Young Artists programme – one of the most highly regarded schemes for young professional operatic artists anywhere in the world.

Neither of the works performed is frequently staged. First up is a neglected opera buffa by Stravinsky that made little impact at its premiere at the Paris Opera in 1922 and has never really subsequently caught on. Here, its rumbustious score, containing multiple parodies, is performed in an arrangement for chamber ensemble by Paul Phillips.

Based on an absurd comic tale by Pushkin, *Mavra* tells how young Parasha manages to smuggle her hussar boyfriend into her mother's house by disguising him as the new cook; things go well until her mother comes home to discover her supposedly female servant *Mavra* shaving.

With their outrageously extravagant wigs and costumes, disastrous cakes, innumerable bin bags, and impossible wallpaper, Rosanna Vize's fun designs provide an ideal background for a plot that is pure Carry On.

The cast enters enthusiastically into the general tomfoolery, with April Koyejo-Audiger's luscious soprano giving Parasha plenty of pep. Sarah Pring brings top-class comedic gifts to the role of her mother, while Idunnu Münch stirs the pot as her busybody neighbour. As the unlikely *Mavra*, Egor Zhuravskii clearly enjoys designer Vize's and director Anthony Almeida's artful playing with notions of dress and gender that are superficially entertaining, but which can be read as deeper and more analytical.

Clearly more serious (as well as a good deal more musically substantial) is Schoenberg's *Pierrot Lunaire* (a title one might translate as Moonstruck Pierrot, or Pierrot in the Moonlight) – a piece regarded as one of the defining works of modernism ever since its 1912 Berlin premiere.

The result, as staged by Almeida, is somewhere between cabaret and expressionist drama, with soprano Alexandra Lowe seizing all opportunities in a tour-de-force of vocal and physical variety carried off with boldness and elan; it's not yet the finished product maybe, but it's a great beginning.

Given that there is only one performer on stage in the piece as originally imagined, the contributions of Vize's simple set centred on a hanging light that doubles as the moon that both intoxicates and inspires Pierrot, Lucy Carter's vivid and occasionally shocking lighting and the reappearance of the cast of *Mavra* – who make surprising yet often telling interventions – are clever ways of disguising the fact the Schoenberg's melodrama is not essentially a dramatic piece at all; but on this occasion it has been made to work.

In the pit, members of the Britten Sinfonia demonstrate their expertise in both scores, with conductor Michael Papadopoulos maintaining firm overall control and a keen sense of style.

THE TIMES | Richard Morrison

Preparing for this Royal Opera double bill of early 20th-century music-theatre pieces, staged as part of the Jette Parker Young Artists Programme, I unwisely tried to forecast my reactions. I imagined myself chuckling through Stravinsky's *Mavra*, which pokes fun at the clichés of 19th-century opera and romantic literature, and grimly enduring Schoenberg's surreal and nightmarish *Pierrot lunaire*, in which a singer swoops around unpitched *sprechstimme* (speech-song) and the accompanying instruments are mired in atonal modernism.

How wrong could I be? Anchored by a stunningly assured and superbly expressive performance from the soprano Alexandra Lowe, *Pierrot* gripped me from first swoop to last. More on that later. By contrast, I couldn't wait for *Mavra* to end, and it's only 25 minutes long. A comedy, yes, but one so clunky and obvious that it's hard for any director to make it fly. Anthony Almeida tries hard, using costumes, a set (Rosanna Vize) and props that emphasise suburbia at its most grotesque and claustrophobic. Respect to the tenor Egor Zhuravskii for retaining some degree of dignity while toggled up in corset, stockings and a wig the size of Wales.

In a clever move that cast reappears as spooky extras in *Pierrot*. So does the same set, at first. Then the hideously wallpapered flats are raised, the oversized chandelier becomes the all-pervasive moon, and we are into Schoenberg's realms of the subconscious, sexual and religious hallucinations and mental disintegration.

How well Lowe conveys that disintegration too; her body imploding from confident swagger to writhing turmoil as she drifts through the work's sequence of increasingly deranged visions. I have rarely heard *sprechstimme* delivered so persuasively, either. She seems to make each slithering syllable mirror the poetry's Freudian metaphors.

All that is brilliantly supported by five instrumentalists from the Britten Sinfonia, immaculately conducted by Michael Papadopoulos. The flute player Thomas Hancox even ventures on stage at one point to duet plaintively with Lowe — a poignant image and a beautiful sound.

ARTS DESK | Alexandra Coghlan

Operatic madness tempered with plenty of method. A collision of musical worlds makes for an intriguing double-bill

A blink-and-you'll-miss-it domestic farce and a fever-dream fantasy of a song-cycle: Stravinsky's *Mavra* (1922) and Schoenberg's *Pierrot Lunaire* (1912) make for an unexpected double-bill. But, if the two stand slightly awkwardly next to one another, they are both facing in the same direction — each looking back into the musical past.

Passacaglias and fugues, love-duets and ensembles, waltzes and folksongs: these are the fragments gathered up by two composers less interested in tearing down the musical establishment at the start of the 20th century than re-purposing it, twisting and skewing the pieces to fit the anxieties of a new age.

Anxiety, tipping into confusion, paranoia and outright madness, is the defining mood of Anthony Almeida's new staging. Designer Rosanna Vize takes the "miraculous white roses" of Pierrot's vision and blows them up into a giant floral pattern: an oversized chintz that sets the tone for the surreal, circus-domesticity of *Mavra* in which tea-tables come laden with jelly (and nothing else), pastels and prim silhouettes explode into outrageous wigs and purple eyebrows, and crinolines conceal holsters of squirty cream.

The story (based on Pushkin's *The Little House in Kolomna*) is simple enough: Parasha misses her boyfriend Vasily, so when her mother laments the loss of the family's faithful retainer Fyokla, she conspires to bring her lover into the household in the guise of "Mavra" a new maid. Cue all the classic comic-opera shenanigans.

The slightness of *Mavra* (which lasts scarcely half an hour) gives a director little elbow-room, and Almeida makes the interesting call to bleed one drama into another, uniting the two disparate halves in a shared world in which an oversized hanging lamp becomes the moon that guides Pierrot's madness. Pierrot himself strays into Parasha's tea-party, and later Parasha and her friends reappear in Pierrot's own fantasies.

Meaning remains oblique, but tethering *Mavra* to something bigger lends welcome heft to its arch satire. Something primal is stirring in Almeida's dolls house, felt not just in the slithering clarinets and off-kilter dances of Stravinsky's score (crisply delivered by the Britten Sinfonia under Michael Papadopoulos) but in characters who plunge their fingers American Pie-style into bowls of jelly, smear themselves in cream and strip down to their underwear.

Jette Parker artist April Koyejo-Audiger brings plenty of bright-eyed naughtiness to Parasha, her soprano swelling generously through Stravinsky's ensembles. She seems to belong to a different opera to Egor Zhuravskii's tidy Vasily – darkly Russian tone meeting bel canto control and sweetness. Sarah Pring shines as Parasha's put-upon mother (barely clinging to sanity here) with Idunnu Munch adding some zesty confusion as the Neighbour. It's all good fun and doesn't overstay its welcome. But it's the second half where this show really comes into its own. Soprano Alexandra Lowe is Schoenberg's moon-struck Pierrot – holding her audience through every shift of mood and character: now a Madonna mourning in a twisted Pieta, now a murderous revenger drilling through his rival's skull to smoke it like a pipe.

Stilling the visuals after the clutter and chaos of *Mavra*, Almeida lets the action move to Lowe's face and body, tellingly lit by Lucy Carter. Committing absolutely to each reinvention, from cabaret-performer to crawling animal, ballroom dancer and androgynous lover, Lowe gives us madness that's never less than precise, underpinned less by the whimsy we often see than a slow-bubbling rage and bitterness. The control of Lowe's *sprechstimme*, plucking pitches from the air, morphing her tone to mirror or battle the orchestra's flute or clarinet, is absolute: a carefully calibrated negotiation between speech and song. Madness can be anarchic, but it's far more compelling when we feel the underlying order and logic as we do here.

OPERA ONLINE | Sam Smith

On the surface, there may not seem to be much in common between Igor Stravinsky's one-act comic opera *Mavra* of 1922 and Arnold Schönberg's groundbreaking *Pierrot lunaire* written a decade earlier. However, in this double bill from the Royal Opera, synergies are implied between the two works without any suggested parallels ever feeling forced.

In Anthony Almeida's staging the action appears to be set broadly in the modern day. Rosanna Vize's set sees a domestic room with high walls covered from top to bottom with a floral pattern. Inside there are many green bags of refuse, with the implication being that these have piled up since Fyokla died. If it is the contrast between cleanliness and rubbish that first hits us, the division proves to be not so clear cut as the crumple of the green bags gives them the same type of swirl as to be found in the flowers on the wall. Similarly, when one of these bags is broken open, roses are to be found within it.

The entire presentation is well thought through as Vasily is initially made to look quite a severe character, with black clothes and slicked back hair. This not only makes it funnier to see him then dressed as a maid, with all sorts of utensils hidden in his suspenders, but also brings into focus this production's implication that the women's clothes he dons give him access to a world that is otherwise denied to him.

It is carried off superbly by the excellent cast comprising April Koyejo-Audiger as Parasha, Egor Zhuravskii as Vasily, Sarah Pring as the Mother and Idunnu Münch as the Neighbour. The staging is dynamic, and all of the characters sharply observed. Having Parasha's Mother catch Vasily shaving his legs rather than his face is an excellent idea precisely because it suggests that he is exploring his gender and, by extension, that this is what shocks the Mother, rather than the actual act of realising Mavra is a man.

Arnold Schönberg's *Pierrot lunaire* sits somewhere between speaking and singing by emphasising timing but not any particular pitches. In his forward to the work Schönberg prescribed that the indicated rhythms be adhered to but that, whereas with normal singing a constant pitch is maintained through a note, here the singer should 'abandon' it by falling or rising. Its themes are very much those of the fin-de-siècle and include the growing materialism of the late nineteenth century and the artist's flight into an interior world, the deconstruction of romantic love, the transmutation of art into a hermeticism, and also an undermining of the whole enterprise through self-mockery.

In the opera the moonlight releases Pierrot into a dream-like state, and this presentation links the clown's experiences to the previous setting so that the action begins in the same space in which Mavra was set. Soon, however, the entire room rises out of sight so that Pierrot effectively ascends into the dark sky above. She is initially decked out in a black trouser suit with close cropped hair, in a style that could come from the 1920s or alternatively suggest Symbolist tastes. This implies a degree of androgyny that is in keeping both with the previous exploration of Vasily, and the fact that the original character is male but is usually portrayed by a female while Schönberg himself never stipulated which gender should play the part. Then, however, she sports a golden dress that shimmers like the moon before donning a maid-servant's uniform at the end as the room descends once more, and she is unceremoniously brought back down to earth. In fact, when we see Parasha's Mother cross the stage we realise that Pierrot might be Fyokla, or perhaps the maid who replaced 'Mavra' after she fled, and wonder if she does this every night as a way of escaping from her mundane daily existence.

The actions Pierrot is given complement the words she proclaims well so that when she talks in 'Madonna' of the Son's body she cradles the cloth that has come from the room's table as if it is one. Later the light that featured in the room in Mavra falls to the ground as if Pierrot is coming to meet the moon. She sings in 'Heimweh' of how Pierrot is wooden and sentimentally modern and this 'moon', which is such an obviously manmade lamp, could be seen as exactly that (though in reality it is a very beautiful piece of design). The characters who appeared in Mavra sometimes grace the

stage, as does the orchestra's flautist, and provide another dimension in a move that works because it is used sparingly.

In fact, even with the presence of other individuals, this feels as stark and vital a production of the opera as one is ever likely to see. Many will include more props so that Pierrot is actually in a bed, or occur in more cluttered areas, but this interpretation lets Pierrot take centre-stage in every sense, and Alexandra Lowe does a superb job of thoroughly commanding it. There are still many ways of obeying Schönberg's quite prescriptive instructions regarding how to deliver the Sprechstimme, and Lowe's interpretation would certainly stand towards the 'musical' end of the spectrum, thus ensuring that this is a particularly thrilling presentation of the composer's seminal creation. Michael Papadopoulos's conducting of the excellent Britten Sinfonia is also highly impressive.