

an alien tongue and appears utterly beyond the comprehension of all.

To this disconcerting drama the music gives extraordinary life, making the libretto seem both apt and palpably human. Remarkably for a score so rich, active and present, the music is precise and economical, supporting, carrying, even (one often feels) enabling the singing voices. And its marvellously flighted, frequently exquisite lyrical lines and great diversities of colour, texture and mood unfold at a pace that enables the listener to 'join' with and be carried by it.

One of the most outstanding features of this opera (as with *Yvonne*), and the quality that finally makes the work so deeply moving, is the way its music underwrites the humanly tragic qualities of the unfolding drama. Resting on lines and textures that are fragile, exposed and vulnerable, the music evokes real empathy: it humanizes anxiety, pain and loss, whatever their cause. Among the work's many memorable moments, and one of high significance in the drama, is its use of fragments of Sinatra's 'My Way' – first hinted at, then magically erupting at a crucial moments, and startlingly rendered, as one has never heard it before.

The cast is strong, with the vocal qualities so well matched to roles that one could easily think that Boesmans and Pommerat, who worked very closely

together, might have written for the particular characteristics of this group of singers. The most outstanding performance comes from the gorgeously voiced Patricia Petibon: appropriately so, since her weighty, complex role as the middle daughter lies closest to the work's agonized heart. The eldest and youngest daughters are excellently served by Charlotte Hellekant's mellow mezzo and Fflur Wyn's youthful, sparkling soprano. The warmth, clarity and nuance of Stéphane Degout's baritone is, fittingly, a strong invitation to sympathy for the increasingly lost Ori. In the roles of aging patriarch, older son and son-in-law, Frode Olsen, Werner Van Mechelen and Yann Beuron are impressive. The actress Ruth Olaizola is compelling as the 'foreign' woman. Under Patrick Davin, the Monnaie Symphony Orchestra plays with passion and conviction.

The booklet offers serviceable notes in three languages. But the libretto is only in French, and printed far too small for comfortable reading, thus raising again the question of why the Monnaie doesn't place the original, plus translations, on its website. One hopes the oversight won't inhibit the reception that this marvellous live recording emphatically deserves – and, especially, that it won't work against the wider celebration, now long overdue, of Boesmans as a major figure in opera today. CHRISTOPHER BALLANTINE

## Opera books

### **A Vision of Voices: John Crosby and The Santa Fe Opera**

By Craig A. Smith. University of New Mexico Press. 265 pp. \$29.95.  
ISBN: 978-0-8263-5575-1

John Crosby, the founding general director of The Santa Fe Opera, inaugurated the company in 1957 and guided it for more than four decades. One can conclude from this splendid biography that among leaders in opera during the last half-century of opera in America, no one

maintained such a lengthy and successful tenure heading a major company, and surely no one possessed a thornier, more complex personality.

The son of a prosperous New York lawyer and his music-loving wife, Crosby (1926-2002) profited from his

privileged, culturally stimulating upbringing. Educated at Yale and Columbia, he worked as a part-time coach and accompanist at Juilliard. By 1953 his desire to found an opera festival had become an obsession. As the locale Crosby chose Santa Fe, where he had spent his second year of high school (for health reasons) and had passed the summer with his family.

Crosby knew Santa Fe was arts-friendly, although inexperienced with opera. He also rightly anticipated that, for many artists, the area's natural beauty would compensate for SFO's meagre fees. Smith gives much detail regarding the ranch first leased and later purchased by Crosby, and the construction of the company's first theatre on that property – paid for with \$200,000 from Crosby's parents. Throughout his SFO tenure, preserving the environment in which the theatre was situated remained crucial to him. He was infuriated, for example, when, for an early Opera Guild event, a tree was cut down to accommodate a tent.

From the start, Crosby hired versatile, musicianly, theatrically savvy artists rather than international stars (exceptions in Crosby's later seasons included Elisabeth Söderström, Tatiana Troyanos and Marilyn Horne). He gave important opportunities to young singers about to achieve renown – Frederica von Stade, Kiri Te Kanawa, Bryn Terfel – and created SFO's apprentice programme, long a model for other summer companies. In programming, although Crosby remained drawn to contemporary repertoire, a complete SFO repertoire list reveals that standard and off-the-beaten-track works were invariably mixed in any season; Crosby's last (2000) included *Rigoletto*, *Figaro*, *Ermione*, *Elektra* and Henze's *Venus and Adonis*.

Smith asserts that behind the young Crosby's desire to found an opera festival was a longing to conduct. One learns of his obsessive diligence in studying scores, but also that he was generally hard-pressed to achieve spontaneity and genuine inspiration in performance. He



■ John Crosby

led a varied repertoire at SFO, but his speciality was Strauss, with 13 of the operas programmed during his tenure.

In this meticulously researched, handsomely produced biography, Smith's style is admirably direct and unfettered. Enhancing the text are many revealing Crosby letters, notes and memos. Smith makes clear that in all areas of SFO's operation, Crosby's exacting – often nitpicking – standards were frequently exasperating. On the personal side, Crosby felt both enormous devotion to his family and intense loyalty to those he respected and trusted, but 'he could also be a good hater and cherish rancour'. Smith surmises that Crosby could have suffered from 'some form of autism spectrum disorder ... that led him to be astonishingly brilliant at facts and figures yet more than a lap behind when it came to many basic interpersonal skills'. Smith characterizes him as 'shy, barricaded', with his homosexuality remaining an open secret within the arts world 'from the beginnings of The Santa Fe Opera, if not before'. Crosby's only significant romantic attachment and his many subsequent dalliances are handled straightforwardly and sensitively.

The book depicts Crosby at every stage of his life in numerous photographs. One of the few in which he doesn't appear is a charming shot of Hindemith and Stravinsky, taken in 1961. ROGER PINES