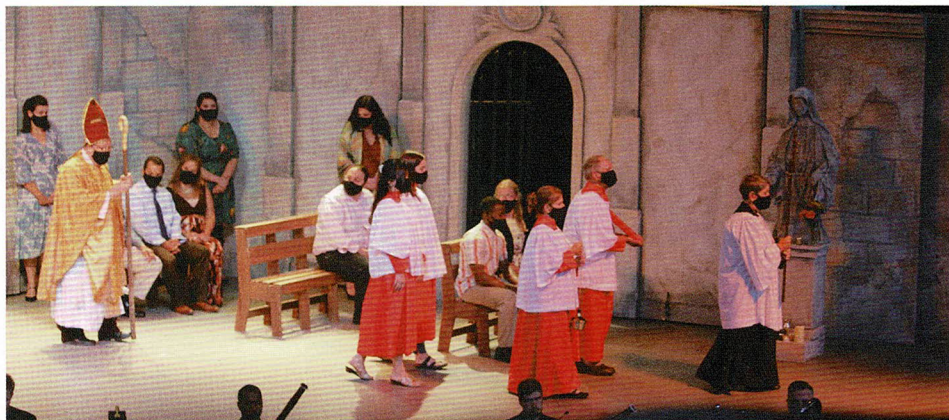


Chisholm

The small town of Chisholm (population 5,000) lies 200 miles north of Minneapolis, in the heart of Minnesota's iron mining country. On a soupy summer evening, the twists and contortions of the Covid-19 crisis made it momentarily the epicentre of the American opera industry, as the NORTHERN LIGHTS MUSIC FESTIVAL presented what was probably the first opera performed live in the US with an audience present since lockdown started.

Almost live, would be a more pedantic description. To minimize possible airborne transmission of the coronavirus, the choral parts for *Tosca* had been recorded



A masked *Te Deum*: 'Tosca' at the Northern Lights Music Festival in Chisholm, Minnesota

live performance on the evening, as the chorus mimed to Act 1's *Te Deum* with anti-viral masks fitted.

The rest (heard at the second performance, on July 19) was raw, often riveting live music-making. At the heart of it were the ringing Cavaradossi of Rafael Davila and the combustible Tosca of Leah Crocetto. Had Covid not wiped her schedule, Crocetto would have been singing *Aida* at Sydney Opera House this summer. Instead she gave her all to Chía Patiño's spare, intimate production, performing with consistent intensity and occasionally unleashing formidable amounts of sheer volume. 'Vissi d'arte' was both nuanced and passionate, and while her Act 2 confrontation with Scarpia lacked up-close physicality—a sensible social distancing informed Patiño's blocking of the singers—her vocal intensity compensated.

Daniel Sutin was a satisfyingly resonant Scarpia—reptilian, but not an archetypal pantomime villain. He was shot by Tosca, not stabbed (social distancing again), and Crocetto used the same gun to kill herself at the opera's conclusion, instead of leaping from a parapet. In the bandshell-like amphitheatre at the MINNESOTA DISCOVERY CENTER, with no backstage area to speak of, it was impossible to build a parapet to jump from.

The amphitheatre's 1,600-seat capacity had been sliced to 250, complying with Minnesota state protocols for outdoor events. The audience was dotted in small pockets about the auditorium, and the floor-level orchestral area also looked unusual. String players wore masks, sat further apart than usual, and had their own music stand rather than sharing. Plexiglass divided them from the woodwind, and from a socially distanced brass section which stretched to the limit of the amphitheatre area. Gavriel Heine was an unflappable presence in this far-flung configuration, his conducting punchily dramatic when needed but notably sensitive to the music's lyrically delicate moments.

This was, of course, no normal *Tosca*, and the easiest thing for Northern Lights's artistic director Veda Zuponcic would have been to cancel the annual festival entirely. Instead the show went on, and for all the occasional scappiness of the spectacle the extra effort involved was worth it. Performers got a much-needed pandemic paycheck, spectators heard some excellent singing, and American opera was given a provisional template for emerging from the desperately arid situation in which it has been placed.

TERRY BLAIN