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'Giovanni' as Snapshot of a New Met

By ZACHARY WOOLFE

THE interview, in a windowless office at the Metropolitan Opera, was over, and Fabio Luisi was off to a rehearsal of Wagner's "Siegfried," enormous score under his arm. A few seconds later he was back, walking in the opposite direction. He stopped. He looked a little uncertain. Did he need help?

"Oh, I know where it is," Mr. Luisi said with pleasant determination. He thought a moment, then pressed on.

Now is the time for Mr. Luisi to learn his way around that labyrinthine building. Last month he was named the Met's principal conductor, becoming, as Anthony Tommasini wrote in The New York Times, "the company's music director in all but name." The current music director is, of course, James Levine, but his persistent health troubles led him to cancel his fall performances, ceding to Mr. Luisi two major new productions: not just "Siegfried," which opens on Oct. 27, but also Mozart's "Don Giovanni," which starts on Thursday and is directed by the Tony Award-winning Michael Grandage, in his Met debut.

"It is the first time I conducted it," Mr. Luisi said of "Don Giovanni." "But I know this piece very well, because I love it, and I've coached it many, many times. For me it's the best of the three Mozart-Da Ponte operas. It has drama; it has fun; it has a lot of subtexts; it has many different and contrasting personalities. And all of the characters take a journey. No one is the same at the end as at the beginning. What I like is that in a short time there is a lot of life."

With a cast of attractive, adept singing actors, a production by a star theater director just starting his operatic career and an unexpected conducting turn by the company's music director in waiting, this "Giovanni" serves as a snapshot of the new Met, with all parties fully on board with the general manager Peter Gelb's oft-stated focus on clear storytelling above all.

"The opera did have a first performance once, at which no one had ever seen it before," Mr.

Grandage said. "And I would argue that most people every night watching it here will not have seen it before. Everyone assumes that all 4,000 people know these operas backward and forward. I don't think so. For many people in the house it will be their first opera. I think once you start playing for them, something starts to happen to the whole piece. You all — director, designer, conductor, cast — take on a huge responsibility to make sure you're presenting the story. And the story is amazing. It's one of the greatest stories ever."

"Don Giovanni" has had an excellent recent history in New York, with an eerily elegant production by Christopher Alden at the New York City Opera in 2009 and a vivid, terrifying version both conducted and directed by Ivan Fischer in August, as part of Lincoln Center's Mostly Mozart Festival. But it has struggled at the Met. Franco Zeffirelli's characteristically overstuffed 1990 production was replaced in 2004 by Marthe Keller's dull version, which never quite caught on.

"The Met needs a new 'Don Giovanni,' " Mr. Gelb said flatly in an interview for the Met's season book. Mr. Grandage's production, with sets and costumes by Christopher Oram and lighting by Paule Constable, is intended to present the opera straightforwardly. It is set in a recognizably 18th-century Seville, with sensuous period costumes and a series of buildings lined with balconies that move into different configurations for different scenes.

"Everyone keeps saying how difficult the piece is," Mr. Grandage said. "But I find that there is a consistency in it. There were bits that were written to be very funny — people hiding, people trying not to be discovered — and I think the difficulty only comes if you decide before you go in that you are dealing with a piece of such great, great seriousness that you can't deal with those funny bits when they come. It's a roller coaster that is still consistent if you find a through line."

Even if Mr. Grandage, 49, and Mr. Luisi, 53, bring fresh perspectives to the opera, it helps that they are working with singers well versed in the classic roles, including the baritone Mariusz Kwiecien, who had his breakthrough year at the Met in 2005 in two Mozart parts — the Count in "Le Nozze di Figaro" and Guglielmo in "Così Fan Tutte" — under Mr. Levine. Mr. Kwiecien has made something of a specialty of the libertine Don.

"I did it for the first time nine years ago," he said. "I thought then that Don Giovanni was a young, happy, powerful, strong guy with great looks, and basically he's going to hell because of his really great life. And that's half true. But now I come at it from an older point of view. He is young and full of energy, but not necessarily happy energy. He is really searching for excitement in his life. And excitement comes as death. The whole thing from the beginning

is preparation for this death. Now it is not only youth but age and resignation and lots of looks behind: how it was and where I am going."

Similar thoughts of goals and origins can't be too far from the minds of the opera's director and conductor. This year has been a turning point in Mr. Grandage's career. After nine successful years as artistic director of the 250-seat Donmar Warehouse in London, a tenure that included Broadway transfers of his productions of "Frost/Nixon" and "Red" (for which he won his Tony), he decided that he would leave the Donmar at the end of the year to work on a larger scale. That includes more forays into opera — he made his debut last year with "Billy Budd" at the Glyndebourne Festival, following it with "Madama Butterfly" in Houston — and, most likely, film.

And Mr. Luisi, on the verge of advancing to the pinnacle of his profession, will conduct "Don Giovanni" from the harpsichord, playing along with the recitative (or dialogue) himself and harking back to his salad days as a coach. The practice is a rarity at the Met, until now the exclusive province of guest conductors.

"I have a very old-fashioned C.V.," Mr. Luisi said, referring to his résumé. "It was usual in the 1930s, '40s, '50s that opera conductors were first coaches for years and years in some small theater. I've played a lot of recitative with harpsichord in my life. You feel so connected to what's happening onstage. It's a way to be in the action with the singers, and you have the possibility of accelerating the action or slowing it down. I know where singers breathe; I know where they need help; I know where I have to push them; I know where I have to help them. That's an experience you cannot have if you don't do this type of career, but younger conductors now are not doing it."

Mr. Grandage also has a certain affinity for an old-fashioned way of doing things, an emphasis on content rather than concept. He compared the strange metabolism of opera to the way things work in theater.

"No one does Hamlet and then spends quite a lot of their career doing Hamlet in other productions," he said. "They move on. They say: 'I've done Lear. I'm moving on.' It explains why opera is sometimes so high-concept. If you have to do the same piece so many times, a high-concept production gives the appearance that you've reinvestigated it. But I think you can reinvestigate it from the inside, in a way that is about character: a character-driven reconsideration."

For his part Mr. Luisi said that there is a fine line between thorough rehearsing and

overpreparation. He misses the sense of joyful impulsiveness that characterized operatic performance at the beginning of his career in the 1980s that has too often been replaced by "thinking, thinking, thinking."

"Singers are a little bit more careful now," he said. "I don't know why. Maybe they fear reactions. Maybe they fear someone will say, 'This is too much.' You have to forget everything about it not being beautiful enough and just do it. This is the physicality of making opera. You have to forget yourself. I don't lose control when I conduct, but I try to get into the scene and into the moment, into the action. I try to really let go, so it's no more about technique or dictating, it's about letting it happen."

These were somewhat surprising, and encouraging, words from a man who has given many in New York the first impression of a rather forbidding figure, with his reserved demeanor and intense publicity photos. A profile by Daniel J. Wakin in The Times in April contrasted Mr. Levine's rehearsal uniform of casual open-necked polo shirts with Mr. Luisi's ties.

Mr. Luisi may still be learning his way around the building, but bounding off to that "Siegfried" rehearsal he was now the one wearing the polo shirt.