

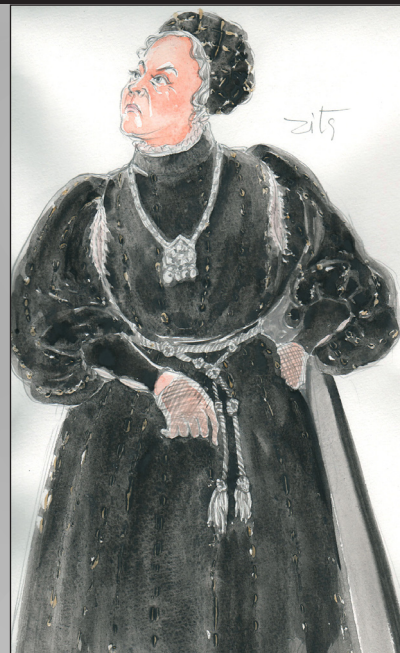
## AROUND TOWN

FRIDAY, SEPTEMBER 5, 2008

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Sketches for costumes in the TSO's productions of *Il Segreto di Susanna* and *Gianni Schicchi*.

PHOTOS COURTESY OF TSO

TSO triumphant  
in operatic double-bill

The Taipei Symphony Orchestra continues its return to form under Martin Fischer-Dieskau with *Il Segreto di Susanna* and *Gianni Schicchi*

BY BRADLEY WINTERTON  
CONTRIBUTING REPORTER

“An opera is like a seascape. Lying there shining in the sun, it looks so beautiful! But beneath the surface there are pearls, and perhaps even diamonds. These are the secret jewels that lie hidden deep within the music.”

So said opera director Tseng Dau-hsiung (曾道雄) on Tuesday evening. The occasion was the rehearsal of the comic-opera double-bill, consisting of Ermanno Wolf-Ferrari's *Il Segreto di Susanna* (“Susanna's Secret”) and Puccini's *Gianni Schicchi*, that opens tonight in Taipei's Metropolitan Hall.

When, a few minutes later, the curtain went up on *Il Segreto*, it revealed one of the finest theater sets I've ever seen in Taiwan — an elegant early-20th century drawing room, complete with tinted-glass ceiling, and with a vast window looking out onto a sunlit forest. The talented stage designer of both operas is Chang Yi-Cheng (張一成). She also designed the Taipei Symphony Orchestra's (TSO) *Idomeneo* earlier this year, as well as their *Don Giovanni* in 2007.

On stage was Wu Bai Yu-hsi (巫白玉璽), the star of so many recent Taiwan opera productions. After the interval he was to re-appear as Gianni Schicchi himself, but for now he was a suave master-of-the-house, and suspicious husband of Susanna (Mewas Lin, 林惠珍).

What could this smell of tobacco on her clothes mean if not a secret lover? When the opera was written in 1909 the evidence was damning enough as then only men smoked. But Susanna is in advance of her time, and is herself a secret cigarette addict.

It's unfortunate that our knowledge of the dangers of smoking undermine this little opera, itself a lyrical gem. What the original librettist conceived of as a defense of women's right to pleasure has become a dated piece of serious misinformation. Even so, the visual and musical delights of this Taipei production will be considerable.

There are only two singing roles in *Il Segreto*, but when the curtain rises on *Gianni Schicchi* you see half the Taiwanese opera stars you've ever known and loved already on stage at the beginning.

There's Yang Lei (楊磊) as Rinuccio, Chen Pei-Chi (陳珮琪) as Zitta, and Liao Chong-boon (廖聰文) as Simone, all dressed up in sumptuous 13th

century Florentine costumes for Puccini's comedy of hypocritical mourning and a faked last will and testament — this instigated by the clever but avaricious Gianni Schicchi.

Lo Ming-Fang (羅明芳) soon arrives as Lauretta, Gianni's daughter, with her famous aria *O Mio Babbino Caro* (“O my beloved father”), in which she pleads with Gianni to save the situation so that she can marry her boyfriend Rinuccio.

“These will be a traditional productions of both operas,” Tseng told me, brimming with confidence — understandably, as the rehearsal had gone very well. “People sometimes tell me I'm too traditional, but for me the aim of opera direction is to highlight the composer's original conception. We're all servants of the music, after all. Anyway, even with traditional productions you still have innumerable options at almost every point in the process.”

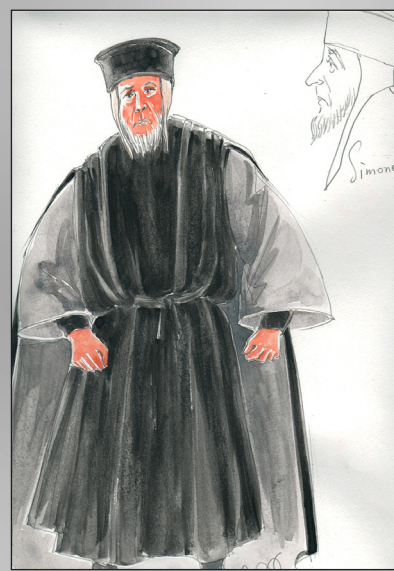
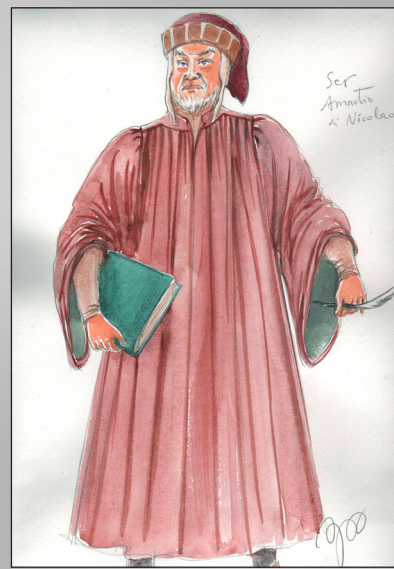
Tseng also told me that the rich music was full of “codes” (“just as in *The Da Vinci Code*!”), motifs that were pointers to the inner heart of the work. He might have added that it's often necessary to listen to the music several times to become familiar with these message-bearing configurations.

Martin Fischer-Dieskau, who will conduct both operas from memory, said that he'd had to work hard to get the Metropolitan Hall to install only a skeletal barrier between the orchestra pit and the front stalls, something that allowed the audience both to see the Taipei Symphony Orchestra (TSO) musicians and to hear them clearly.

This is now in place, and on Tuesday night the orchestra was in fine form under Fischer-Dieskau's insightful direction. The pit boasts an adjustable platform so the orchestra could rise up from the depths even while the orchestra's playing and he's conducting — something that won't happen this time, however.

All in all, everything seems set for another step in the TSO's rehabilitation as a major force in Taipei's classical music life.

It may be hard to find a seat for this weekend's two performances in the modestly-sized Metropolitan Hall. But help is at hand. *Gianni Schicchi* is to be repeated, along with Act Two, Scene 1 of Puccini's *Madame Butterfly*, but with the Hsindien Youth Orchestra (國立新高中音樂班管弦樂團) and for one performance only, in the much larger National Concert Hall on Oct. 6.



## PERFORMANCE NOTES

**WHAT:** Ermanno Wolf-Ferrari's *Il Segreto di Susanna* and Puccini's *Gianni Schicchi*

**WHERE:** Metropolitan Hall, 25 Bade Rd, Taipei (台北市八德路三段25號)

**WHEN:** Tonight at 7pm and Sunday at 2.30pm

**TICKETS:** NT\$1,000 and NT\$1,200 tickets sold out; NT\$400 to NT\$800 tickets available through NTCH ticketing