

Singing its praises

OPERA

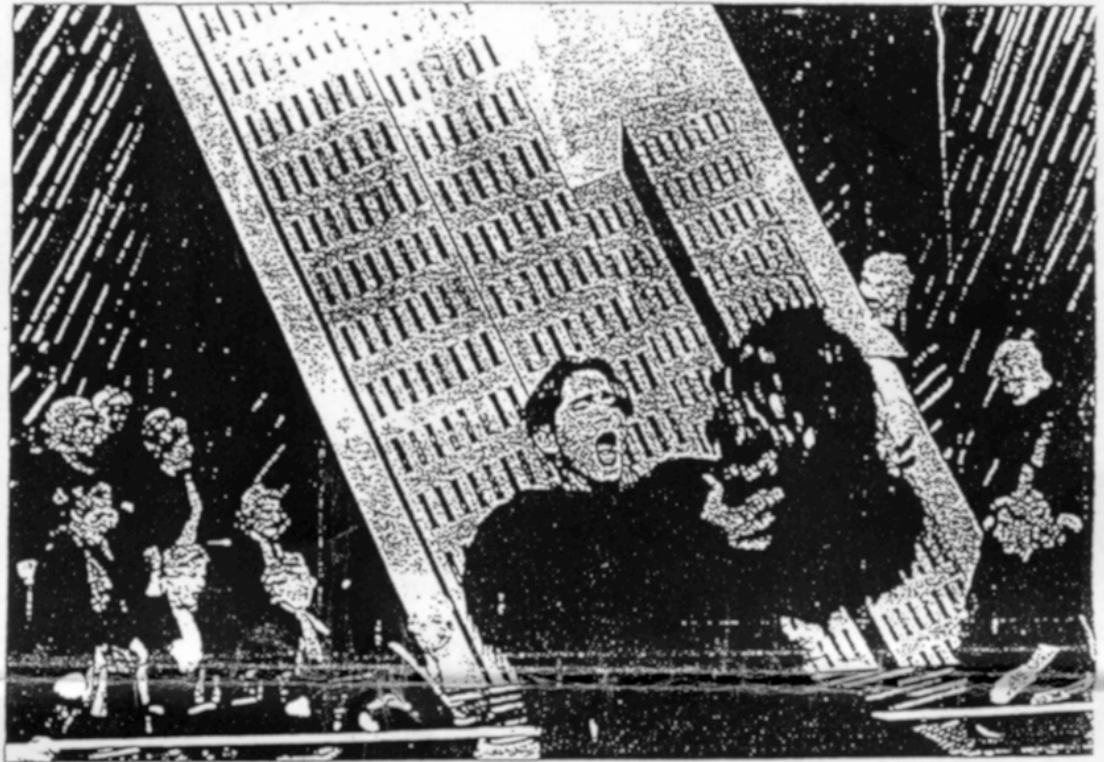
Die Zweite
Mrs Kong
Heidelberg/Vienna

Some while ago *The Second Mrs Kong* was dropped from the invitation list for the South Bank's forthcoming Birtwistle spree, for lack of funds. Undaunted, and unflagging, though, she has recently been putting in appearances as *Die Zweite Mrs Kong* at theatres in Heidelberg and Vienna, in productions which — partly through their differences from each other and from the Glyndebourne original of 1994 — prove the vitality, charm and variety of the composer's fifth and most recent opera.

It is also heartening to find his music at last commanding such attention, which ought to continue, for something else these productions prove about *Mrs Kong* is that the piece can be done with limited resources, by regional and surely even by student companies.

Heidelberg reveals its shoestring budget in tacky sets, but these are in the cheerful spirit of the occasion. In a small theatre and with a reduced orchestra sunk beneath the stage, the emphasis is on the singers and on Russell Hoban's libretto, which is likeably unfettered in its spatchcocking of world mythology, popular cinema, great art and social realism. The action, directed by Ralph Bridle, is more frankly presented than it was at Glyndebourne. We have a Paganini on stage to make sense of the phantasmagoric violin solos, and the vaporous love affair between a painted image (Pearl, the Vermeer girl) and a celluloid idea (King Kong) develops touchingly.

Much of the success is due



Robert Schwartz makes a "muscular and engagingly puppyish Kong" in Heidelberg's staging of Birtwistle's op

to the cast. As Pearl, Brigitte Geller is unaffected, sweet and accurate right up to the top of this high-flying part: when her image is projected on to a cross-lit screen, she also looks strikingly like the Vermeer portrait. Robert Schwartz, although he has problems with the upper edge of Birtwistle's tenor writing, is muscular and engagingly puppyish as Kong.

It is a pity that Orpheus has to be sung by a mezzo rather than the intended counter-tenor: in Vienna the excellent Angelos Fotiadis reminds us how much the role needs that plangent falsetto tone. Still, this is a thoroughly enjoyable evening. The first-night audience laughed a lot and went out happy.

At the Vienna performance I

attended, nobody so much as grinned. That this was an altogether darker account was due partly to the fact that the orchestral music was now heard at full strength — and superbly played by the Győr Philharmonic under Andreas Mitsek — and partly to the high-tech Grand Guignol production, by Peter Pawlik. There was a lot of scowling and cruelty. Anubis was not the entertainingly portentous music-hall MC of Heidelberg but a raddled decadent of bizarre habits, and Kong not a playful furry animal but a near-nude, tense and athletic golem (Doug Jones), clambering around a gloomily lit steel-girder set.

Comedy was wilfully avoided, as in the presentation of the

Sphinx as a severe woman in uniform, and magic too. But the real magic of the piece lies in what we hear from the orchestra — the fine, brave solos, the clatterings of tuned percussion, the ruminative re-grouping for melodies, the moments of attack when the music suddenly swivels all its attention to what is happening on stage — and everything here was magnificently done.

Taken together, the two productions confirm how many great operatic moments this piece contains: in everything to do with the mirror that sings as a pair of coloratura sopranos; in the Sphinx scene; in the endings of both acts as duets which drift off elsewhere; in the sinister appearance of the "Death of

Kong; in the rescoring sequence from the film; in first-act duet for Pearl and Kong; and in the realisation of Inanna, who in the text is an ageing sex kitten, but becomes through the music character of steadily increasing depth and closer presence.

Hitherto, Birtwistle's operas have been predominantly male, and *Mrs Kong* is centred on its masculine hero. But in the number, importance and richness of female roles we may be witnessing a turn towards Birtwistle's future operas, which the first, according to hints in the Vienna programme, is to be a journey into outer space.

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