

hand-wringing, his Verdian tones giving a stamp of authority.

The conductor Henrik Nánási was attentive to every singer, achieving multiple mood changes with appropriate dynamics and tempo. As for the house chorus, it was as if the singers had wound their own clock back to July 2020, when a semi-staged version brought Madrid's opera world back to some sort of normality after the pandemic shutdown. It was entirely fitting that this staging, dominated by a huge clock marking the passing of time, with Violetta accompanied throughout by Dr Grenvil as a walking symbol of death, should finally arrive here in Spain.

VICTORIA STAPELLS



*Sabina Puértolas in the title role of 'La traviata' at the Teatro Real*

## SWEDEN

### Båstad

The idyllic corner of Skåne in which Birgit Nilsson grew up was (still is, largely) an opera-free zone: little wonder she felt the need to escape and spread her wings, and little wonder too that she remained attached all her life to the family farm and wider region. It's fitting, then, that the Birgit Nilsson Foundation is putting something back into the local community through the BIRGIT NILSSON FESTIVAL, where concerts and events culminate in an annual full opera performance for an audience of 3,000 at Båstad's TENNISSTADION. Shuttle buses help to bring spectators from all around to the small town, and many locals are involved—not least in the chorus, which this year drew on five choirs, many of their members more used to singing at church services. This summer their challenge was *Aida*—the title role of which Nilsson first sang in Stockholm in 1951—and they worked hard under the experienced baton of Pier Giorgio Morandi to produce an atmospheric performance. Morandi's conducting of the Helsingborg Symphony Orchestra drew exciting results, with the players producing strong accents and the requisite tension to make a truly Verdian sound (August 9).

The cast showcased several past winners of the Birgit Nilsson Stipendium—and this year's laureate, the shining soprano Karolina Bengtsson, who was appearing as the High Priestess the night after giving her winner's recital at Västra Karup Church. The King was taken by the imposing bass Henning von Schulman (who received the prize in 2016), and Amonasro was sung by Fredrik Zetterström (2013), disclosing a real Verdian baritone. Christina Nilsson (2015) came to Båstad in between her Bayreuth performances as Eva, and sang *Aida* with gleaming power and projection,



Anyone for 'Aida'? Verdi's opera at the Birgit Nilsson Festival

riding the ensembles with ease; indeed, she seemed to do everything with ease, floating the lines in her Act 1 aria and fearlessly negotiating the tricky intervals that are a feature of the role. The Nile Aria was a highlight, sung with shape and amplitude. The guests were led by Sofija Petrović, jumping in as Amneris and singing with burnished tone to produce smooth, glinting lines; Martin Muehle managed his mature tenor resources well to shape a credible 'Celeste Aida'; and Krzysztof Bączyk was a strong Ramfis. The concert staging—in which the singers didn't go far beyond clenched fists at 'Guerra', but which featured choreographed dances—was directed by Staffan Valdemar Holm, yet it was the musical side that made this *Aida* authentically thrilling.

JOHN ALLISON

## SWITZERLAND

### Geneva

Four Violettas at once, tamperings with the score, grotesque costumes, photos of animals to evoke the countryside, Alfredo gagged by his father, a boxing match at Flora's party and gallons of blood. Those were just some of the incongruities—musical, theatrical, visual and more—to be found in the new production of *La traviata* at Geneva's GRAND THÉÂTRE (seen on June 18). If the International Opera Awards introduces a category for Desecration of a Classic of the Repertoire, the staging will merit an immediate nomination.

Trumpeted as 'a star of the German stage', the director Karin Henkel brought credentials from the straight theatre, but her only previous foray into opera had been