

## Performances

### *Lady in the Dark*

Staatsoper Hannover

Premiere: 15 October 2011

Even before the show opens, the closed curtain depicts the play's subject matter. A large black-and-white portrait of a woman's head, one half positive, the other negative, represents the split personality of the evening's protagonist, Liza Elliott, who runs a fashion magazine as a tough boss but dreams of being the object of every man's desire. With the help of a psychoanalyst she discovers that dreams actually hold the key to her problem. Her renunciation of feminine qualities goes back to a childhood trauma, the moment when she first learned to see herself as plain and unattractive—an ugly duckling. Even though the psychological interpretation no longer appears as fresh as it did in the 1940s, topics such as "increase in anxiety attacks" or "lack of women in executive positions" made the news (again) very recently in Germany. Thus Liza appears to us as a true contemporary—except perhaps for the fact that she smokes.

Prior to Staatsoper Hannover's premiere production, only three German cities had made their stages available for *Lady in the Dark* (Kassel in 1951, Lübeck in 1976, and Freiburg in 1983). Such restraint probably comes out of a long "cherished" distrust of Weill's American works, which now has given way to a new curiosity that smacks of a treasure hunt. Hannover's staging may very well fuel this awakening interest. On the other hand it is by no means an easy task to stage this work, which defies categorization, because its structure—a straight play interrupted by three substantial, self-contained musical units—is anything but ordinary. And both Moss Hart's book and Weill's score combine elements of serious and entertaining theater. In a nutshell, *Lady in the Dark* does not deliver what audiences, at least in Germany, expect of a musical. Hence the piece might be better off in an opera house than in a venue presenting Broadway shows.

In any event, *Lady* is in good hands at Staatsoper Hannover, which pulled out all the stops. A number of roles were cast from the opera's roster of singers: Roland Wagenführer (Kendall Nesbitt), Christopher Tonkin (Randy Curtis), and Mareike Morr (Elinor Foster) sang dependably, acted vividly, and really seemed to enjoy their tasks. For the demanding part of Liza, the Opera engaged Winnie Böwe. This turned out to be a smart choice, as



Liza (Winnie Böwe) at the office, joined by her colleague Maggie Grant (Kerstin Thielemann).

Böwe is trained both as an actor and a singer, and she is familiar with Weill's music, having performed in *Die Dreigroschenoper* and *Happy End* (audiences in Hannover can catch her again this season as Eliza Doolittle in the Staatsoper's production of *My Fair Lady*). The opera house's resources also include a chorus and a dance ensemble, which show to their fullest advantage. Melissa King's inspired choreography makes dance an integral part of the dream sequences, and the ensemble received a well-deserved extra round of applause at the end. The Niedersächsisches Staatsorchester acted as pit band; conducted by Mark Rohde, the opera's First *Kapellmeister*, it delivered a solid and energetic performance. The fact that the Staatsoper respected the show's original structure paid off: *Lady in the Dark* begins without an overture, but an entr'acte follows the intermission. The director cleverly launched into the second act even before the entr'acte ended, when the orchestra struck up the melody of "Saga of Jenny."

So far, each of the three German-language productions has generated a new translation, and Hannover also decided to commission one. Roman Hinze's German rendering occasionally employs colloquial turns and phrases (such as "Blau ist heute angesagt"—blue is the color of the day), just as Ira



The Wedding Dream turns into a nightmare. Liza (Winnie Böwe) surrounded by the entourage. Photos (3): Jörg Landsberg