

Singing soon in a cinema near you ...

With its live broadcasts reaching three million, the New York Met is bringing opera to the masses, says

Tim Teeman



Is this really behaviour befitting an opera diva? Shouldn't Anna Netrebko be sitting glacially in her dressing room burning an assistant with her curling tongs? Instead, during the intermission of a matinee performance of Donizetti's *Anna Bolena* (Anne Boleyn), the starchy Russian soprano is backstage at the Metropolitan Opera in New York, dressed in busy black and white Tudor costume, pulling faces and trying to cause as much low-level disruption as possible.

Two of her co-stars from the opera, in which Netrebko sings the title role, are being interviewed by Renée Fleming, another leading lady, today the on-screen anchor for the Met's performance, which is being transmitted around the world on high-definition cinema screens to an audience of about 235,000 people, with

cinemas in Russia, Italy and Israel showing a Met opera for the first time. From humble beginnings, these live broadcasts are making opera more accessible than ever before to a global audience; in the UK alone, 76 cinemas now show opera from the Met. And although other opera houses, among them the Royal Opera House and the Glyndebourne Festival, have their own broadcasts, the Met is pre-eminent.

Three million people a year watch the opera house's productions in 1,600 cinemas in 54 countries (800,000 people a year, by comparison, pay for house tickets). The HD audience for *Anna Bolena* today in the US alone is 90,000, generating \$2 million; it is the first of 11 HD performances this season. One cinema in Wolfsburg, Germany, asked for photos of the Met's interior so it could redecorate its box-office area like the Met, chandeliers and all.

Netrebko can be forgiven her high-jinks: everyone — from performers to conductors to the Met's general manager, Peter Gelb — says the mood is different on "an HD day". Sets, make-up, costumes: all must be pristine. As he fits doublet and cod-piece to the Russian bass Ildar Abdrazakov (Henry VIII), David Sylvester, the head of the principal men's wardrobe, reveals his team nervously watch on monitors for stray pieces of material. (A shirt, deemed too creased for HD, is hurriedly ironed.) Abdrazakov admits to getting nervous "two minutes before the stage" as the size of the worldwide audience hits him.

Netrebko says: "Nervousness is good: it leads to an incredible energy. Sometimes your voice cracks on a high note, as mine did during one *Romeo and Juliet*. The camera is so close it can see everything, so I learn to make my face relaxed." She jokes that HD "puts on five kilos", and means the cinema audience "can see how a singer is using their body and voice. You can't pick your ears," she laughs. For Gelb, performances on an HD day "are better than average. Great artists are like great athletes. They respond well to pressure."

Now in its sixth season, *The Met: Live in HD* series has outgunned its rivals, raising \$11 million in profits last year. Naturally Gelb wants to expand HD performances. The Met receives 1 per cent of its income from public subsidy (unlike Covent Garden, which received £27 million last year shared between its opera and ballet companies) and so pursues every commercial opportunity. When interviewed for the job six years ago, Gelb told the Met's board that the opera house "had become an island with no bridges to the mainland. We had to reconnect with the public."



It is awe-inducingly exciting to be backstage during the performance. Behind the curtain onstage I listen to the audience take their seats. A "scratch tape" — the opera filmed in full — is ready to be transmitted should anything go awry with the live transmission. Members of the chorus sit awaiting their entrance on bits of scenery, or practise releasing swords from scabbards. All the sets for that night's performance of Verdi's *Nabucco* are placed behind *Anna Bolena*'s, to be moved into place in the three-hour gap between the end of the matinee and the start of the evening performances.

Screen idols: *main pic*, Anna Netrebko stars in *Anna Bolena*; *above*, Peter Gelb (*far right*) backstage during the broadcast; *above left*, Renée Fleming interviews the cast

Opera will not survive without emergency measures

From the wings you see the invisible "lip" carved into the front of the stage where a prompter sits, helping performers with lines or signalling to them to sing quieter or louder. There is a makeshift room, invisible to the audience, where Ekaterina Gubanova (Jane Seymour) must, in 45 seconds, be cut from one dress and fitted into another. There is a tense moment when Gubanova and Abdrazakov are not given the opportunity to say "Hello Russia" in Russian to the audience in their home country: this isn't just patriotic politesse but a vital commercial shout-out.

Fleming says that when she performs for an HD show she makes her performance "subtler. The camera and microphones do so much of the work you would usually do." She is "amazed" she has got "more reaction to the HD performances than anything in my career." Most e-mails she receives are nice — "Sometimes they'll say, 'Not sure about the jacket'" — and at airports she gets mistaken for the

American news anchor Katie Couric. HD makes opera accessible to an audience "who otherwise couldn't afford it," Fleming says. "It enables young people to test the waters without the anxiety of buying a ticket or wondering what to wear."

In a truck on a side-street, Gary Halvorson, the HD director, shouts "2", "4", "5", instructing which of the ten cameras to go to next, each accompanied by a contortion of his body. "Nice shot," he exclaims. Or: "No! Tighter!" Gelb sits behind him, observing keenly. "I had to revitalise interest in the Met," he says. "HD helps that. Opera is an art-form that cannot expect to grow, let alone survive, unless emergency measures are taken. But we maintain our standards, we're not dumbing down."

The plain-speaking Gelb adds: "Opera has never been financially viable. There is no business model in traditional capitalist terms that justifies its existence. The challenge every company faces is rising labour costs set against the limited capacity of any theatre. This is one of the largest in the world with 3,800 seats, yet ticket sales won't keep us going. We'd have to charge \$1,000 a ticket to break even."

Won't people stop buying opera tickets if it's cheaper to go their multiplex? "I don't think so," Gelb says. "It's not happened in sport. You can watch every kind of game on TV yet

still people watch it live. We've quadrupled our paying audience through movie theatres."

Is the Met's future assured? "As long as people keep coming back," Gelb responds drily. "I don't kid myself about the dangers. If the economy completely collapses, we are in serious trouble, although not being reliant on public subsidy makes us better off than European houses. Our decisions are not driven by any political issues. But to assume the Met will always be here is the best way of ensuring it won't be."

Besides expanding HD performances, Gelb will next oversee the launch of a new Met app containing an audio-visual archive of performances. Fleming thinks live opera could be streamed online "to make it available all over the world."

Yes, she accepts, this would mean fewer people seeing opera live: "As with a recording you cannot tell what a voice is really like if you are not in the hall. But wouldn't it be wonderful if so many people bought cinema tickets that it led to the price of house tickets coming down, so more people could come to the opera?" She laughs gently. "But that's a long way away. We can dream."

The next *The Met: Live in HD* performance is *Don Giovanni*, Oct 29, which is being broadcast at more than 75 cinemas across the UK. To see the complete 2010-11 season and to book tickets visit metopera.org/uk

5 of the best — opera on screen

October 25

Adriana Lecouivre
Prerecorded from performances last year, the Royal Opera's gaudy production of Cilea's extravagant melodrama is a showcase for two of opera's most bankable (and cinema-friendly) artists, Angela Gheorghiu (*left*) — starring as the eponymous diva killed by a poisoned bouquet — and Jonas Kaufmann as her two-timing lover. (cinema.roh.org.uk)



November 5
Siegfried

Over at the Met in New York, Robert Lepage's new *Ring* cycle has been garnering mixed reviews, but the French-Canadian director is a master of spectacle, much of which might actually come off better in a filmed format. Deborah Voigt (*below*) sings Brünnhilde, Gary Lehman is Siegfried, and our own Bryn Terfel sings the Wanderer (for the first time anywhere). (metopera.org/uk)

November 7 and 14
Tosca

Gheorghiu and Kaufmann reunited in performances of Puccini's opera prerecorded from this summer, a "dream team" completed by Terfel and Antonio Pappano in the pit. At Covent Garden, tickets were reportedly going for £350 on the internet. This will cost you around £15, excluding popcorn. (cinema.roh.org.uk)



January 21

The Enchanted Island

Chances are you haven't booked tickets to New York to hear Plácido Domingo (*below*) in this "new" Baroque spectacular, a montage of 18th-century hits by Handel, Rameau, Vivaldi and more arranged by William Christie to an entirely new storyline. Domingo plays... well, we don't know yet, but who cares? The cast also includes two brilliant singer-actors in the soprano Danielle de Niese and mezzo Joyce DiDonato. (metopera.org/uk)

January 27

Berliner Philharmoniker

Not opera exactly, but one of the world's greatest orchestras with one of the world's great mezzo-sopranos, Magdalena Kožená, who is also the partner of the orchestra's chief conductor, Simon Rattle. She sings Dvorák's *Biblical Songs* and Mahler's *Rückert Lieder*. The concert ends with Schubert's *Unfinished*. (berliner-philharmoniker.de/en/media/livekino)

Tips on tickets

There is no central booking service for the Met broadcasts as requests are handled by individual cinemas. Some cinemas sell out for the Met broadcasts months in advance, but others have seats up to the day. Many cinema groups offer membership schemes with priority booking. Neil Fisher



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