

mention. The producer Elena Barbalich retained the 18th-century setting, and took as her starting point a naturalistic idea (a 'labyrinthine' house, alluding to the intricacy of the plot and the relationships between the characters) that became increasingly abstract in the third and fourth acts. It was a stylish, traditional production, well acted, with clever pictorial allusions, and graced by lovely costumes by Tommaso Lagattolla (who also designed the sets), but it failed to leave any real mark. Overall, this was a production below the standard that the Regio has recently been able to offer.

GIORGIO GUALERZI

## Lebanon

### Beirut

The AL BUSTAN FESTIVAL has offered a significant amount of opera in its 21-year existence, mainly by presenting small but intrepid troupes such as the Warsaw Chamber Opera and Moscow's Helikon Opera, known for innovative productions. It was founded by Myrna Bustani, Lebanon's first female member of Parliament, and over its month-long duration maintains an impressive schedule of music, dance and theatre events at the AL BUSTAN HOTEL, in its picturesque situation on a hillside overlooking the city. This year Bustani, who remains a dynamic presence at the festival, and Gianluca Marciandò, the festival's music director, decided on a different approach to opera, one that put the emphasis firmly on the singing. The result was the Middle East's first *Norma*, performed in concert in the hotel's intimate Emile Bustani Auditorium.

With a repertoire that runs from Vitellia to Liù, Carmen Giannattasio has made no particular specialization of works by the early-19th-century Italian masters, but on the strength of her Covent Garden Elisabetta (*Maria Stuarda*) last year and now her first ever *Norma* (heard on February 28, at the second of two performances) such works would seem to be natural terrain for a singer whose mentor, after all, was Leyla Gencer. Moreover, with her keen dramatic instincts and her handsomely focused voice, capable of projecting a variety of shadings, she more than once reminded me of Mariella Devia. She brought a sure legato to 'Casta diva' but also a measure of tension that prevented lines from going slack. Her astute handling of words made confrontational moments especially vivid, and where coloratura passages intensified expression of passion, she delivered them accurately and with dramatic purpose. Occasionally phrases came and went that that could have been more tellingly inflected. But Giannattasio's first *Norma* was a considerable achievement. And, dressed in a floor-length, robe-like gown designed by Rabih Keyrouz, she looked duly ceremonial as the Druid priestess.

She was well paired with Nino Surguladze's Adalgisa, sung in a firm, evenly-produced, slightly smoky mezzo. Surguladze's less artful, more impulsive approach contrasted well with Giannattasio's insightful musicality, and their voices blended appealingly in their duets. The Mexican tenor Arturo Chacón-Cruz, a past winner of Operalia, sang Pollione with a bright, slightly grainy tenor and good diction, and entered into the drama convincingly. Gocha Datusani, who like Surguladze hails from Georgia, brought to Oroveso the imposing sonorosity and rough vocal texture of a classic bass of the Eastern European school. The choirs of Antonine University and Notre Dame University of Louaize performed well, as did the State Youth Orchestra of Armenia under Marciandò's leadership. The orchestra's playing was not flawless, but Marciandò, who observed the standard cuts, gave the music style and shape.

GEORGE LOOMIS