performance was authoritatively directed by the young Spanish conductor Jordi Bernacèr.

The third opera on the programme was Bellini’s Zaira (July 29). As is well known, after the failure of the Parma premiere in 1829, Bellini went on to re-use substantial sections of the score, mostly in I Capuleti e i Montecchi. The Martina Franca festival’s attempt to recreate the opera, however, was not at all convincing, not least because of the staging, which certainly did not help to make the action comprehensible. The producer Rosetta Cucchi chose a double narrative: on the one hand, representing the past, there was the story of Zaira, caught in a conflict of love and duty between a Christian woman and a Muslim man; on the other, there was that of a modern-day reporter captured by Islamic fundamentalists and facing the same deadly fate. Tiziano Santi’s set consisted of a movable wooden structure which, down below, served as a middle-Eastern prison full of captives subjected to every kind of maltreatment and violence, while up above the tale of Bellini’s heroine was acted out. It was consequently somewhat difficult, if not downright impossible, for the audience to concentrate properly on the music, distracted as they were by the parallel action. In the circumstances, the young conductor Giacomo Sagripanti was hard pressed to pull together a score which, despite some fine passages, does not really hang together either dramatically or stylistically.

In the title role, Saioa Hernandez displayed a strong personality and a powerful voice. Simone Alberghini (Orosmane) gave a distinguished performance, both vocally and dramatically, but the mezzo-soprano Anna Malavasi produced some inappropriately verismo-type sounds in the trouser-role of Nerestano. The remainder of the cast consisted of the high tenor Enea Scala in the ungrateful role of Corasmino, and Abramo Rosalen, whose attractive voice rather raised the profile of the character of Lusignano.

The last offering, on July 30, was something of an experiment: a version of Luigi Rossi’s Orfeo of 1647 by the composer Daniela Terranova and the producer Fabio Ceresa, who recast the drama and reduced the length of the opera to just over an hour. I have nothing but praise for the result, not least because of the commitment of the young performers, particularly the countertenor Ilham Nazarov (Orfeo) and the soprano Kristel Pärtna (Euridice). A real success.

DINO FORESIO

Mexico

Tijuana

One singer stood out in the CASA DE CULTURA DE TIJUANA’s production of Carmen, staged in a rodeo arena in a beachside area of this Mexican border city. She was Grace Echauri, the most astonishing Carmen I have seen. Her animal-like portrayal—ranging from an untamable bird to a bull ready to gore anyone who crossed her path—at times seemed like a study in mental illness, yet it was complemented by a dark mezzo and seemingly natural vocal control that kept out any trace of sentimentality from this performance. Playful in the first act, she was a deadly threat to Don José even by the time we got to Lillas Pastia’s. The flippancy with which Echauri shaped her words was highly musical but also possessed of an underlying violence, with any beauty of expression laid as a trap.

As when I’d previously heard Echauri’s Carmen, in Bangkok, she was surrounded with a decidedly uneven cast. Unusually in opera, the tenor acted better than he sang. José Luis Duval’s Don José was vocally one-dimensional, but he pulled off the murder of Carmen with gross brutality. Annoyingly, he tended to pronounce French as if it was Italian. Amed
Lievanos’s Escamillo never really came to life and his Toreador Song lacked bravura. Monica Abrego had some pretty moments as Micaëla. The chorus, drawn from both California and Baja California, was lively, and helped to bring continuity to José Medina’s production. Few of its members had performed in opera before, and the same applied—more damagingly—to the players of the Orquesta de Baja California. Under the baton of Armando Pesquiera, they had rehearsed for only a few hours before performing with the cast—a fatal drawback in a regional opera production with inexperienced performers. But the musicians’ ability shone through in the Entr’acte to Act 3, which was especially evocative under a full moon on the first night (August 30), while having real horses carry the principals on at the start of the act was one of the production’s strongest points.

Tijuana’s Instituto Municipal de Arte y Cultura (IMAC), the local city government agency dedicated to the development of culture, deserves kudos for its many attempts to promote the arts in a city more often associated—in the minds of neighboring Americans anyway—as a place of cheap bars and crime. Seats at the two sold-out performances were deliberately low-priced in order to maintain accessibility. For visitors, Tijuana also offers the magnificent Centro Cultura Tijuana (CECuT), complete with exhibition spaces and restaurants that beat anything on the adjacent American side of the border. With more careful casting and better orchestral preparation, Tijuana could offer first-rate opera for audiences from both sides and become a more significant centre for the arts.

**Netherlands**

**Amsterdam**

The Queen’s jewels have been stolen, and with them her joie de vivre, her beauty and her fertility have vanished. Thus begins Der Schatzgräber, the opera by Franz Schreker that was once one of his most popular but is now, like most of his works, a rarity. The performance that opened the 2012-13 season of the NETHERLANDS OPERA showed that the work—premiered in Frankfurt in 1920 and with a libretto by the composer—boasts a glowing, dynamic score in the Wagnerian line, in which the opulence of Richard Strauss mixes with Debussian subtlety (October 9). The Netherlands Philharmonic Orchestra, conducted by Marc Albrecht, gave a powerful performance, while also managing to provide support to the singers. But the vocal parts are also taxing, especially those for Els and Elis. Manuela Uhl was convincing as the former, a seductive young woman and femme fatale who gets her fiancé’s murdered to obtain the jewels but falls in love with the wandering minstrel Elis and surrenders completely to him. With her strong, if not very seductive soprano Uhl sailed successfully over the sound of the orchestra but had some intonation problems. Raymond Very tackled Elis with bravura and an agreeably expressive tenor voice, which was heroically sustained until the end. The character of the Jester benefited from the incisive voice and clear enunciation of Graham Clark, while Tijl Faveyts was an authoritative King, and Kay Stiefermann a solid Bailiff. From the ensemble, Andrew Greenan’s Innkeeper and Gordon Gietz’s servant Albi deserve mention.

On stage, the director Ivo van Hove ignored the medieval setting to transfer the action to the present (in rather poor sets by Jan Verweyveld), creating an uninspired and banal context for the drama. The Inn of Els’s father seemed to be located in some American backwater, frequented by white trash, and Els herself was presented as a cheap whore. The royal palace resembled an old people’s home; the beauty of the score