

It's a New Met. Get Over It.

By CHARLES McGRATH

THE METROPOLITAN OPERA opened its 126th season on Monday — Peter Gelb's third as general manager but the first over which he has had complete control — with Puccini's "Tosca," one of the sturdiest and most beloved war horses in the operatic stable. This was very good news if you were the sort of traditionalist Met fan who could happily watch the old Italian repertory — "Tosca," "Turandot," "Madama Butterfly" — over and over again, and are not looking forward to offerings later this season like Janacek's "From the House of the Dead," an almost plotless opera set in a Siberian labor camp, or "The Nose," Shostakovich's adaptation of a story about a man who doesn't have one.

On the other hand, the Met's new "Tosca," directed by Luc Bondy and designed by Richard Peduzzi, mothballed the nearly 25-year-old Franco Zeffirelli production, which though baroquely overstuffed was immensely popular with audiences. "Tosca" takes place in some of Rome's most famous landmarks, and the Zeffirelli sets made you feel as if you were actually there. By contrast Mr. Peduzzi's version of the church of Sant'Andrea della Valle looks like an enormous brick warehouse and features lots of industrial metal and a big red oil drum. There were boos from the die-hards on Monday at the end of the second act, at the beginning of which Scarpia appears to receive oral sex, and even more, along with a small stampede to the exits, at the end of Act III. Mr. Gelb listened impassively.

In his office a couple of weeks ago Mr. Gelb said the decision to open the new season this way, with a brand-new, pared-down production of an opera that was a trademark of the old Met, was "not an accident." His self-proclaimed mission from the beginning has been to revivify an institution whose core audience he thinks is rapidly aging itself to extinction, by re-emphasizing opera's theatricality.

"I didn't understand fully how difficult it was going to be," he added. "I don't go into a season hoping that just some things will work. Everything has to work. The stakes are very high. The Met is at a moment when either it will continue to be the leading opera house or it won't. There's no middle ground."

To that end he has commissioned new productions, some of works seldom seen in New York; signed up new singers, who don't just "park and bark," as he puts it, but actually act; and recruited directors from Broadway, like Bartlett Sher, and the movies, like Anthony Minghella, who died last year. Mr. Bondy is a Swiss director of opera and theater, and though Mr. Zeffirelli recently called him "third rate," his productions have a reputation for braininess and for stripping away clutter. James Levine, the music director of the Met, likened his new "Tosca" to a Hitchcock movie.

Mr. Gelb's program was initially greeted with skepticism, if not hostility, by many opera buffs. In his last job, as president of Sony's classical record division, where he recorded an album of arias by the soft-rocker Michael Bolton and where his greatest hit was the soundtrack for "Titanic," purists saw him as a shameless panderer. Mr. Gelb, who likes to point out that classical music used to be pop music, is unrepentant. "I haven't really changed," he said. "The only thing that changed was the world I was working in. I've always tried to popularize classical music, and I'm still doing it, only I don't work for a classical record company anymore."

And whatever his record at Sony, Mr. Gelb's Met career has by most reckonings been an almost immediate success. The audience has both grown and become more youthful. He has reached out to contemporary visual artists and begun a promising collaboration with André Bishop, the artistic director of Lincoln Center Theater, to develop new work. His program of showing selected operas on live high-definition television broadcasts has been tremendously popular, filling movie theaters both here and abroad.

There have been artistic misfires, like Mary Zimmerman's production last year of "La Sonnambula," which set the opera as a play-within-a-play and was also hooted at on opening night. But for the most part the Gelb vision has so won over the opera world that it's hard now to find anyone with something critical to say — at least on the record. Most of the grumbling one hears these days is not about the merits of the new Met productions but about how expensive they are. Since Mr. Gelb took over, the Met budget has increased by about \$60 million. The box office is up, but meanwhile personal and corporate donations, which the Met depends on to balance its budget, are down, thanks to the economy, and so is the value of its endowment. The Met's projected deficit for next year is about \$4 million.

In the spring Mr. Gelb (whose own pay had gone up more than 30 percent since he started, to \$1.5 million) asked the stagehands union to take a 10 percent salary cut. Instead its members agreed to forgo a 3 percent raise this season in return for a one-year extension on their contract, which was about to expire. Both the singers' union and the one representing the orchestra, however, have declined to negotiate until the Met agrees to let them undertake a confidential analysis of the opera's business plan. Alan Gordon, the executive director of the American Guild of Musical Artists, the orchestra union, said, "I'm sure there are problems, but I don't think anybody sees the Met going under, no matter what happens," and added: "We want to do due diligence, just like an investment bank. I'm certain that if our members thought the Met needed help, they'd be willing to give it, but what kind of help needs to be demonstrated."

Mr. Gelb, after cutting his own salary and that of his management team, reluctantly scaled back his plans for the new season, canceling or replacing four productions. "I sweat the budget every day," he said. "We've cut millions of dollars from it. To our labor force and our board we can't seem as if we're spending money irresponsibly. But I'm also trying to explain to them that it's necessary to maintain artistic momentum to achieve the kind of fund-raising and ticket sales we need — the fuel that runs the engine. If you stop it, the whole thing will collapse."

In many ways Mr. Gelb is the antithesis of his predecessor, Joseph Volpe. Mr. Volpe, who declined to talk about his successor, began as a carpenter at the Met and rose through the ranks. He was tough, prickly, shrewd about budgets and labor negotiations and had excellent taste in singers. He famously ruled with an iron hand. When the soprano Angela Gheorghiu once complained about a blond wig she was supposed to wear in a production of "Carmen," he told her: "The wig goes on. With you or without you."

Mr. Gelb, who turns 56 in November, comes from cultural royalty. His father, Arthur, was the culture editor of The New York Times back when that job carried even more clout than it does now. His mother, Barbara, is the stepdaughter of the playwright S. N. Behrman and a niece of the violinist Jascha Heifetz. After high school Mr. Gelb, determined to pursue a career in music, decided not to go to college, which can't have pleased his parents, but his father nevertheless arranged for him to get a mailroom job with the impresario Sol Hurok. He got a crash course in dealing with artistic willfulness when he became Vladimir Horowitz's manager at a time when Horowitz was at his nuttiest and most paranoid,

demanding during a Russian tour that his food be airlifted and his piano guarded by the Marines.

At the Met, Mr. Gelb's style is quiet and diplomatic. His spine appears to be made of bendable zirconium, instead of the traditional steel, except that he's such a master of detail that he almost always gets his way. He's a tall, soft-spoken man, charming and awkward in about equal measure. During interviews you can watch him edit himself as he speaks.

Unusual for the director of a major opera company, he spends much of his time not in his office but in the opera house itself. He has a temporary desk, with a laptop, set up between Rows Q and R on the left side of the orchestra, and from there he keeps an eye on everything that takes place onstage or in the pit, dashing out every now and then for a phone call or a meeting. He is there to put out fires before they happen, or, as he said, to "resolve any artistic issues that come up."

At the first run-through of the new "Tosca," for example, he consulted with Mr. Bondy and Max Keller, the lighting director, about the lighting in Act I; he did not fail to notice that in Scarpia's death scene Scarpia's wig fell off, causing the singer to fling it aside like a diseased rodent; he debated with Mr. Bondy the merits of two stunt doubles who had been hired to undertake Tosca's famous Act III leap. (In keeping with Mr. Gelb's emphasis on realism and theatricality, this production provides no offstage mattress for her to land on; Tosca takes the plunge in full view of everyone.)

Mr. Sher, whom Mr. Gelb hired for "Il Barbiere di Siviglia" in 2006 after admiring his direction of the Broadway musical "The Light in the Piazza" and his revival of Clifford Odets's "Awake and Sing!," said of his experience at the Met: "I was unbelievably impressed by the deeply thought-out, overall vision that Peter had worked out for the Met at every level. I had never seen anyone so totally involved."

A lot of their conversations, he added, had to do with Mr. Gelb's helping him to navigate through the Met. "The opera organism really tests you," he said. "Theater works much more efficiently, and opera singers are like really, really gifted athletes who work in horrible conditions. They test you openly. But Peter was out ahead of everything. He paved the way and helped push the organization. He told me, 'If there's a problem, I want you to call me immediately.' "

It's not true that you have to be skinny to sing for Peter Gelb, but it doesn't hurt. "There's no doubt that expectations are much higher now," said the soprano Renée Fleming, a Gelb mainstay and enthusiastic supporter. "Before, you didn't have to be so fit, or move with such athleticism. Peter has put much more focus on the theatrical side, and the audience is happy about it." She added: "I haven't seen yet that an extraordinary talent has been dismissed. The line is moving somewhere in the middle when you have to decide between an attractive performer and someone who has a little better instrument."

Because singers book their engagements years in advance, the head of an opera company these days needs to be a soothsayer of sorts. Mr. Gelb keeps closely guarded in his office a document he calls the Sheet — a spreadsheet blocking out what every singer the Met is interested in is doing, here and abroad, for the next five or six years. Not that advance planning necessarily does much good. Singers are always getting sick or dropping out for personal reasons, and Mr. Gelb has been singularly plagued by last-minute cancellations. The Scarpia for the new "Tosca," Juha Uusitalo, withdrew, because of illness, just before the dress rehearsal and had to be replaced.

But Mr. Gelb has been unusually adept at filling vacancies with talent of almost equal measure, not just backup singers, and instead of waiting for singers to become stars elsewhere, he has been aggressive about signing them up early. We can expect to see a great deal of people like Natalie Dessay and Diana Damrau, who are excellent actors as well as great singers and whom he clearly regards as the future of the new Met.

Ms. Damrau, a soprano, was a big deal in Europe but hardly known here when Mr. Gelb signed her up as Rosina in "Il Barbiere di Siviglia" and has since become an audience favorite. She said of Mr. Gelb: "He's a fantastic man. It's a wonderful working relationship. He has his eyes and ears open all the time, and you can always go and talk to him. That's what I appreciate most. At a lot of opera houses in Europe there's a distance." She added: "There must be stars, and Peter knows that stars are popular with the audience. But he isn't a populist. He connects the stars with nontraditional roles. O.K., you need 'Traviata,' but he also thinks in different directions."

Mr. Gelb is married to the conductor Keri-Lynn Wilson and has two children from a previous marriage. His day sometimes begins as early as 4 or 5 a.m., when he checks his e-mail and gets on the phone to Europe. On Monday he was on the job until well after midnight. Wearing a black shirt and velvet tuxedo jacket, he

held between-act receptions in his office for friends, family, people from the art and the theater worlds and even the president of Finland. (Karita Mattila, who played Tosca, wearing brown contact lenses, is a Finn.) After the second act he and Mr. Bondy also fussed backstage over the timing and light cues for Tosca's leap.

And then he presided over a dinner for high-rolling Met donors under a tent in Damrosch Park. If he was smarting over the opera's reception, he didn't show it. Referring to the Zeffirelli version, he said to the guests, "After 25 years we must move forward by offering new productions that will startle our imaginations and will demonstrate that our art is not locked in the past."