Funding flows less freely than champagne at ROH

L'ITALIANA IN ALGERI
Opera by Rossini.

Performed at the Royal Opera House, Covent Garden, London.
Conducted by Gabriele Ferro.

Reviewed by JONATHAN RICHMOND

O n receiving news of a new production of Rossini's L'Italiana in Algeri, the first opera performances of 1988, everything looked normal at Covent Garden. The packed house seemed oblivious to the recent price increases that had brought the cost of an Orchestra Stalls seat to £160 ($315) and of a place in the Grand Tier to £70 ($134). The crowd was as dressed-up as ever, the intermission din in the Crush Line as loud, the champagne as bubbly. Yet the Royal Opera House has questions hanging over its long-term future amidst charges of elitism and declining artistic standards.

In recent times, public funding has not been flowing as freely as the champagne, and Covent Garden Chairman Sir John Sainsbury has taken up his new position at what he says in the recently-released Annual Report is a "critical time" for the Royal Opera House, in which the deficit has built to an "unprecedented level of standards."

Although some of last year's productions were favorably received by the press, negative notices have been frequent and barbed, while the rival English National Opera Company, which performs in English without international stars, at a much lower cost per production, has received constant critical acclaim.

The new Rossini production - initially devised by Jean-Pierre Ponnelle for the Vienna Staatsoper - showed up some of the problems. While the chorus and orchestra were first rate, several of the expensive lead performers were pedestrian at best, making for an evening's entertainment that was adequate, not outstanding.

Ponnelle's sets were terrific - crisp, evocative of the mysteries of the harem. The chorus of eunuchs, replete with outrageous stick-on bellies and grotesque facial masks, were well choreographed, sang energetically and were very funny. And the orchestra, conducted by Gabriele Ferro, proved every crevice of Rossini's music with their witty, fast playing.

(please turn to page 7)

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Agnes Baltsa sings Isabella in the Royal Opera House production of L'Italiana in Algeri