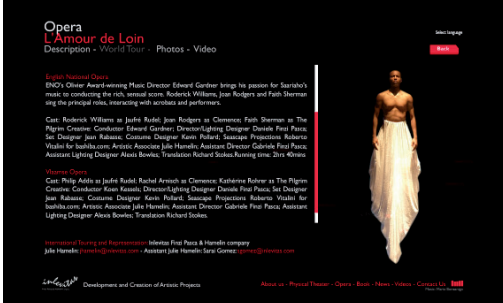
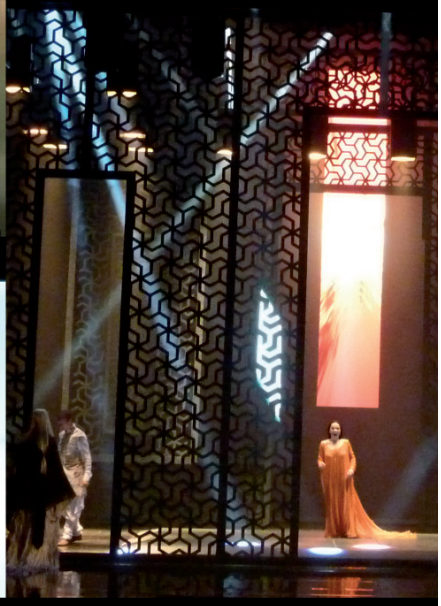
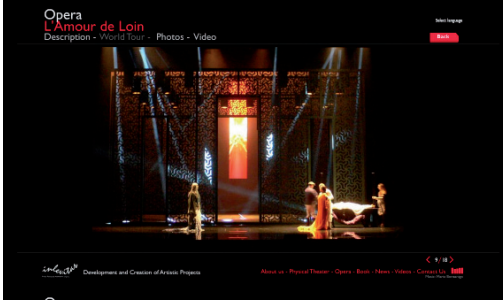
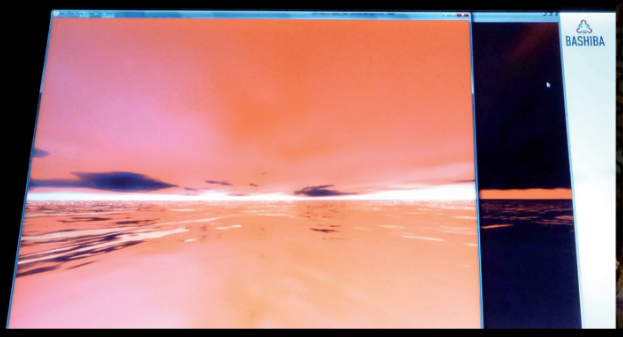
VIDEO SCENOGRAPHY ENGLISH NATIONAL OPERA









FINANCIAL TIMES MONDAY JULY 6 2009

Arts

OPERA

L'Amour de loin

Coliseum, London

The perfect love is the unattainable love. It's not a bad thesis, because the balance of human happiness tells us that someone fulfilment destroys desire. It is on this philosophical conundrum that Kaija Saariaho and her librettist, Amin Maalouf based *L'Amour de loin* (Love from Afar), which received its UK stage premiere on Friday, nine years after its Salzburg debut.

As in all worthwhile operas, the story is simple but its subtext is rich. A troubadour idealises a princess he has only heard about, and, in the process of meeting he dies, leaving her to a fate of unfulfilled desire.

The work's performance history – including an excellent BBC concert in 2001 – had suggested Saariaho went long on mosaic-meditative atmosphere and short on drama. What English National Opera proves is that *L'Amour de loin* occupies a theatrical world of its own, and we're much less fit finding it visually aesthetic as precisely, focused and consistently coloured as Saariaho's score.

ENO's decision to commission a staging from new wave circus director Daniele Finzi Pasca was one of those wildly inspired strokes that define a company. It is rewarded for this artistic daring with a show of such mesmerising beauty and chaste theatricality that you can't help feeling Finzi Pasca should be given *carte blanche*, starting with *Tristan and Isolde*.

Medieval and modern, oriental and occidental, film and footlights: this staging fuses them in a seamless sheen of imagery and movement, achieving a sophistication UK opera rarely sees, partly because of its conservative taste but mainly for want of money.

What is so wonderful about Finzi Pasca's work, assisted by Jean Rabasse (set), Kevin Pollard (costumes) and Roberto Vitalini (video), is that it opens up the poetic range of a score that has hitherto seemed overly static. That quality didn't disappear on Friday, but the assertive use of acrobats, acting as the singers' spirits, minimised it.

Their poise is matched by Richard Stokes's translation, by Roderick Williams, Jean Rogers and Faith Sherman (a sensational European debut) in the three roles, and by the orchestra and chorus under Edward Gardner, who has done so much to raise standards and morale at ENO. ★★★★★

Andrew Clark