clusters, an orchestra of winds, percussion and harp, with extra percussion instruments played on stage by the cast, and expressive vocal lines which rarely ask the 26 solo singers to do anything other than sing beautifully. It is a challenging score but not inaccessible, although there is some rather loud boooing from a faction in the audience at Rihm’s curtain call. The cast however is warmly applauded as they should be. In the title role, Andreas Schmidt is elegant and intelligent throughout, likewise Emily Golden as Jocasta. William Pell as Kreon has the least gracious vocal writing but he sings the high tessitura without any sign of distress. Veteran baritone William Dooley sings Tiresias without any indication that he was 30 years into his career at this time. The technical quality is excellent although some of the chiaroscuro lighting effects appear not to have been adjusted for the filming, and occasionally things get a bit murky.

Neither of these DVDs comes with any sort of added features beyond booklets with notes, but the performances and repertoire are self-recommending and not likely to be duplicated in the near future.

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Bernd Alois Zimmermann. Die Soldaten. DVD (Blu-ray). Ingo Metzmacher / Vienna Philharmonic. Directed by Alvis Hermanis. With Alfred Muff, Laura Aikin, Tanja Ariane Baumgartner, Tomasz Konieczny, Renée Morloc, Gabriela Beňáčková, Matthias Klink, Daniel Brenna, Wolfgang Ablingr, Boaz Daniel. [Berlin]: EuroArts, 2013. 2072584. $39.99.

As its fiftieth anniversary approaches, Die Soldaten seems to be making a renewed bid for canonicity: it has been staged in six cities since 2002 and will be produced in two more in 2014. So it is an auspicious time to have a new production released on video, the first to be widely available since the Stuttgart production was re-released on DVD (Arthaus Musik, 100270 [2002, 1989]). With its excellent musical performances, detailed characterization, and straightforward direction, this performance, recorded at the Salzburg Festival in August 2012, stands as an eminently plausible record of an important and difficult twentieth-century work.

Three of the principals deserve the highest praise: Laura Aikin, as Marie, Tomasz Konieczny, as her fiancé Stozius, and Daniel Brenna, as Desportes, the soldier responsible for Marie’s ruin. Aikin in particular is astonishing, bringing complication and emotion to the role in her physical acting, in her facial expressions, and above all in her vocalism (she is a celebrated Lulu with formidable atonal credentials). Brenna’s registral extremes, especially at the high end, come across as appropriately strained yet precisely colored as he ranges from a capably menacing seducer to a contemptible villain. Konieczny seethes with rage and frustration throughout much of the opera, biting into spiky, bitter lines. All three characterizations are convincing, grounded, and physically dynamic.

Orchestrally, too, it is hard to imagine a more expert team, as the Vienna Philharmonic (conducted by Ingo Metzmacher) brings its singular confidence and virtuosity to bear on a fiendishly difficult score. Balance is mostly excellent (except when intertwining vocal lines overlap with occasionally thick orchestral textures, as in the Toccatas), and the sound quality is crystal clear, bringing to light an impressive sense of the score’s timbral details. The collage moments (e.g. the Baroque counterpoint, the Bach chorale, the jazz) all come across beautifully.

The production, by Alvis Hermanis, has much to recommend it. The overall aesthetic is realistic and coherent, gritty but historically specific. The “riding school” back-story of the Felsenreitschule is emphasized with hay bales and live horses, and the hall’s abundant vertical space is exploited, as when a body double for Marie walks a symbolic tightrope. A long bank of windows allows for many striking visuals, including silhouettes, military crowds, and projected
images (mostly of vintage pornography). Behind the windows and in a narrow box at the stage’s midpoint, Hermanis sets a series of interesting pantomime sequences during the opera’s orchestral passages.

Except for a not-entirely-literally pregnancy, most directorial interventions hew closely to the original playwright’s basic story; more significant is that the opera’s traditionally anti-war ideology is de-emphasized in favor of a general critique of masculine aggression. Hence the militant drumbeat of Zimmermann’s ending, instead of corresponding to the prescribed images and sounds of soldiers and bombs, accompanies Marie as she writhes and grasps at the air ritualistically, perched high above a final image of a woman on a cross.

The opera’s complicated timelines are generally aided by the camera work, which helpfully switches perspectives between multiple sites of action while maintaining a sense of the overall picture. The exception is the simultaneous scene in Act IV, in which the camera and the subtitles do frustratingly little to clarify the chaos. Then again, in scenes in which the music and drama are comparatively stable, the cuts can be too busy (e.g. in the Countess’ monologue or the Act III trio). The frequent close-ups, however, are genuinely moving, thanks to the high caliber of the acting. Overall, the production is filmed in a way that captures the opera’s weight, drama, and complication, without entirely confining it.

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Philip Glass. The Perfect American. DVD (Blu-ray). Dennis Russell Davies / Madrid Teatro Real Chorus and Orchestra. With Christopher Purves, David Pittsinger, Donald Kaasch, Janis Kelly, Marie McLaughlin. Directed by Phelim McDermott. London: Opus Arte, 2013. OA1117D. $29.99.

The world premiere of Philip Glass’s twenty-fifth opera, The Perfect American, has been released on DVD/Blu-ray, and the result is impressive. The performance, conducted by Dennis Russell Davies and directed by Phelim McDermott, was co-produced in January 2013 by the Teatro Real and the English National Opera. It was filmed and recorded in HD surround sound. The disc also includes excellent liner notes by Glass scholar Keith Potter.

Set in 1966, The Perfect American is about a dying Walt Disney. Diagnosed with cancer, the patriarch of animation turns inward and contemplates his mortality, his legacy, and America’s cultural fabric. He is an arrogant yet vulnerable figure, consumed by power and terrified of death. The libretto is based on Peter Stephan Jungk’s 2004 novel Der König von Amerika, and Glass’s opera tackles the subject effectively. The Perfect American is tightly composed (clocking in at just under two hours), thought provoking, and poignantly beautiful. Baritone Christopher Purves brings a visceral edge to the Walt Disney role, and he is surrounded by strong performances, particularly tenor Donald Kaasch as the maligned studio worker Dantine and bass Zachary James as the animatronic Abraham Lincoln.

Glass maintains a minimalist aesthetic throughout much of the work, and his delicately layered ostinatos, undulating rhythms, and long lyrical lines thoughtfully complement Disney’s nostalgic ruminations and creeping paranoia. But Glass also demonstrates his musical versatility, most notably in the choral writing, which commands a significant role throughout the work. Glass gives the chorus a rich harmonic palette, including a clever new setting of “Happy Birthday” sung for Walt’s surprise party. The harmonies are akin to a patriotic anthem, a fitting ode for Disneyland’s founder and ruler.

The Perfect American also benefits from marvelous stage and video effects. Dan Potra’s set design makes extensive use of transparent scrims that become screens for ghostlike animations (Leo Warner and 59 Productions), which float and swirl throughout the performance space. The animations are often spawned from the ac-