

Will Crutchfield and his Teatro Nuovo shed new light on bel canto's beginnings

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By Edward Sava-Segal, 08 August 2018

After more than two decades leading a bel canto program at the Caramoor Festival, musicologist and conductor [Will Crutchfield](#) has started a new training and performances initiative under the aegis of the Purchase College. Named Teatro Nuovo, the program is meant, in Crutchfield's words, "to bring some of the insights and performing skills of the early music world into the Romantic Opera". For the first summer, he proposed two works, both composed in 1813: the little known *Medea in Corinto* by Giovanni Simone Mayr and Rossini's *Tancredi*, the opera that made a 21-year-old composer famous. After its première at the Teatro la Fenice, the latter was seriously altered, several times, in the following months. Crutchfield decided to present two versions, distinguished mainly by different endings: one, public pleasing and triumphant, the other restoring Voltaire's tragic finale in which the hero learns the truth about his beloved only after being mortally wounded. Crutchfield labelled this second version *Tancredi Rifatto* (remade) and combined the death scene first presented in Ferrara and alternative solos initially heard in Teatro alla Scala or other venues during the work's tumultuous first couple of months evolution.



Christine Lyons (Amenaide)

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The single performance of *Tancredi Rifatto* was a revelation. Alas, there were just a few opera lovers, scattered in the acoustically satisfying hall, to witness it. The surprise started with the unorthodox arrangement of the Teatro Nuovo's instrumentalists in the pit. The seating plan was inspired by one used in early 19th century Italy, allowing a better distribution of the sound: some violin players were turned towards the stage rather than the conductor; violas and cellos were divided; woodwinds also faced one another; there was a central musical "anchor" consisting of a contrabass, next to the stage, and the *violoncello al cembalo*, next to the public. The role of leader was assumed by a triumvirate: Jakob Lehmann, the concertmaster (*primo violino e capo d'orchestra*), *ilmaestro al cembalo*, Will Crutchfield, giving cues to the vocalists, and Hilary Metzger (*violoncello di cembalo*) sensitively sustaining all the recitatives. There was also another mysterious *dramatis personae* placed in the pit and facing the stage. Initially, I

thought it was a prompter, then I assumed it was the chorus master, but, in fact, the character was giving cues to everyone on stage.

The music rising from the pit sounded marvelously clear. The gut-stringed instruments provided a sound of tremendous purity. Masters of their craft as Kristin Olson (English horn, oboe), Thomas Carroll (clarinet), playing on period instruments or faithful replicas made palpable a Handelian aura that we don't typically associate with Rossini's music. Truth be told though, I wish that the horns were, at times, less tentative.

Maestro Crutchfield carefully underlined the transitional character of the music, neither Classical nor Romantic, with shortened recitatives, a significant contribution of the all-male chorus and Rossini blending serious and comic sequences into a new style marked by his exceptional musicality.



Augusta Caso (Isaura)

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The soloists – all relatively young with a solid background but still struggling to find their place in the operatic sun – were uniformly good. Dressed in modern garb, they entered, moved around and left a stage bereft of any props. As Tancredi, mezzo [Aleks Romano](#) navigated with ease the difficulties of the role, her voice equally beautiful, expressive and fluid along the entire span. The artist, able to express with unshowy intensity grief, disdain or hope, was as effective in Tancredi's arias as she was in multiple dialogues involving the character. The role of Amenaide was taken by soprano Christine Lyons. Even if her challenging fioriture were not always crisp and the sound produced lacked a certain individuality, her pitch was very steady in her long cantilene lines and her scenic presence remarkable. Tenor David Margulis excelled in the role of the considerate statesman and father Argirio, singing high notes with fine-tuned, clear sound and elegant phrasing before he got a bit tired. Warm-voiced bass James Harrington was more than decent in the role of Orbazzano, Tancredi's rival. In the secondary role of noblewoman Isaura, mezzo Augusta Casa displayed a particularly interesting timbre. Baritone Junhan Choi was quite convincing in his devotion as Roggiero, Tancredi's esquire.

The most "shocking" aspect of *Tancredi Rifatto* came at the very end. In this stark finale, there are no trumpets roaring, drums beating or coloratura arias. Just strings, haltingly accompanying the hero's dying whispers, then silence. Expecting operatic conventions hitting their apogee, one encountered some un-climactic, very modern, last bars. Beautiful.