

# Early Romantic Opera, Joined With Its Sound World

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Mezzo-soprano Tamara Mumford, giving quiet dignity to the role of the exiled warrior Tancredi, anchored the Teatro Nuovo concert performance of Rossini's tenth opera at the SUNY Purchase campus. (Production photos by Steven Pisano)

By Susan Brodie

PURCHASE, N.Y. – For twenty years, the conductor, musicologist, and critic [Will Crutchfield](#) directed [Bel Canto at Caramoor](#), a country-house [summer music festival](#) an hour north of New York City. During the Caramoor years, he directed two 19th-century operas each season in semi-staged productions in an outdoor theater. He cast a combination of marquee-name and established local artists, rising stars imported from Europe and elsewhere, and members of a thriving training program. The resident orchestra sat onstage, and singers performed in front of and around the instrumentalists.

Crutchfield's day-long programs of lectures and recitals culminating in an evening opera became can't-miss summer outings for opera-starved New Yorkers. Now he has transferred operations to the nearby SUNY campus in Purchase and renamed his project [Teatro Nuovo](#), dedicated to specialized study of early Romantic opera. The opening-night concert version of [Rossini's Tancredi](#) (1813) on July 28 bore the fruits of Crutchfield's more focused attention on performance practice, introducing to the U.S. the historically informed performance style of 19th-century opera that is burgeoning in Europe.

*Tancredi* was Rossini's tenth opera and his first big success. He received the commission from Venice's Teatro La Fenice when he was only 20, and wrote it in less than a month. The scenario is based on [Voltaire's version of events](#) in 11th-century Sicily involving conflicts among the Syracusan forces during their war against Byzantine and Saracen armies. The warrior hero Tancredi, banished as a child from his native Syracuse because of power struggles among three families, seeks to regain his heritage as well as the hand of his beloved Amenaide, who has been promised by her father, Argirio, to Orbazzano, head of the third rival clan. A complex backstory involving an intercepted letter makes Tancredi distrust Amenaide, who has been framed for treason, until a last-minute revelation leads to a happy ending.



Will Crutchfield, artistic and general director, Teatro Nuovo



Young Rossini, as depicted on a trading card

The admittedly convoluted plot provides plenty of dramatic fodder for arias, extended solo scenes, and duets of ravishing beauty. Rossini's experiments with the compositional formulas of *opera seria* pushed the art form toward more naturalistic forms of expression and assured the young composer's place in the business. Tancredi's tuneful first-act cabaletta "Di tanti palpiti" became a huge hit in and outside the opera world; Marilyn Horne's discovery of the *aria* in the 1960s led to Houston Grand Opera's 1977 production, a touchstone of the modern bel canto revival.

One of Teatro Nuovo's major innovations over the Caramoor program is the attention paid to the orchestra. Caramoor's resident ensemble, the excellent [Orchestra of St. Luke's](#), includes a number of early-instrument specialists who regularly play with period-instrument ensembles in the U.S. and beyond. But for Teatro Nuovo's orchestra, Crutchfield has worked to approximate the sound of the early 19th-century Italian opera orchestra by using baroque specialists playing antique or replica instruments played at A=430 (about a quarter-tone lower than modern concert pitch). Instruments are distributed on both sides of the pit, a layout documented at the [Teatro San Carlo in Naples](#) during Rossini's tenure as music director. The orchestra is directed not by a conductor waving a stick, but by the lead violinist standing at the front of the pit (the energetic [Jakob Lehmann](#)) and by the keyboardist (Crutchfield, playing fortepiano). The continuo keyboard and cello face the stage, and the rest of the players more or less face each other in an elongated circle, an arrangement that encourages the players to listen to one another.



The Teatro Nuovo orchestra was tuned down to A=430 and led by violinist Jakob Lehmann.

The biggest sound difference was in the winds, made of wood instead of metal, and in the valveless horns and trumpets. The softer, tangier wind and brass sonorities paired with string instruments fitted with gut strings created a light but characterful timbre and enabled singers to execute their trills and roulades without forcing for volume. The overall sound was warm and transparent; in the 1,372-seat concert hall, closer to the size of old Italian opera houses, the orchestra provided colorful support without overwhelming the singers.



Rising soprano Amanda Woodbury, as Amenaide.

Another major difference between Caramoor and Teatro Nuovo is simple but important: With the orchestra in the pit, the singers had the empty stage to themselves. This put the focus squarely on these young talents, many of whom were unknown to local audiences. Mezzo-soprano [Tamara Mumford](#), already well established at the Met, anchored this production as the exiled warrior. Her generous, plummy sound was particularly exciting in her lower register, and she gave a quiet dignity to the unjustly maligned Tancredi.

As Tancredi's beloved, Amenaide, rising soprano [Amanda Woodbury](#) displayed a lovely lyric voice that blossomed over the course of the evening. Her exquisite high pianissimos and splendid trill conveyed the character's feminine fragility.

Argentine tenor [Santiago Ballerini](#), first engaged by Crutchfield in 2015 and now a rising name in Europe, was Amenaide's father, Argirio. His smooth, securely produced voice has a hint of the nasality heard in Rossini tenors from Latin America (Florez, Camarena), which gives his attractive, lighter instrument unforced carrying power. He has a secure top, a fine *messa di voce*, and accurate if slightly indistinct coloratura. I look forward to seeing him in a romantic hero role.



Santiago Ballerini is a fine tenor of unforced carrying power.

Cast in supporting roles were three resident artists (i.e., younger emerging singers) with promising voices: mezzo-soprano [Hannah Ludwig](#) as Amenaide's companion Isaura, bass-baritone [Leo Radosavljevic](#) as Amenaide's heartless suitor Orbazzano, and mezzo-soprano [Stephanie Sanchez](#) as

Tancredi's esquire Roggiero. The women especially impressed with luscious sound and easy technique, though Rodosavljevic had the most natural-sounding Italian – for a text-driven art form, this is not damning with faint praise.

Although this was a concert performance, there was just enough staging to make this viewer wish that more attention had been paid to the theatrical elements. All the singers were vocally well rehearsed, but the drama was hampered by a certain cautious blandness. Bel canto demands more than a supple throat: Those intricate flourishes – which the young artists executed with fearless and subtle imagination – must communicate the extreme emotions laid out in the text. Heightened expression is the goal of bel canto's technical demands, and it's the rare artist who can make those virtuoso displays sound heartfelt, not simply exhibitionistic. The cast and all-male chorus sang well, but especially toward the end, each aria seemed to convey the same generic agit ; the parade of singers filing on and off, slack musical transitions, and a lack of urgency made the evening seem long.



Mumford's plummy sound was notably exciting in the lower register.

In relinquishing the more picturesque environment and established audience base of Caramoor, Crutchfield is gambling on the appeal to opera lovers of a more concentrated approach to the repertoire he has championed for the past 20 years. As at Caramoor, the public is invited to explore the art of bel canto with lectures, master classes, and contextual recitals on campus, and a dedicated [website](#) is packed with information. While the utilitarian setting of a modern college campus precludes the glamor of a country estate, it also lacks the acoustic and climate annoyances that plague an outdoor setting. The audience seemed a bit sparse on opening night, but the response was enthusiastic. With that big, empty stage crying out to be filled, it is to be hoped that future seasons will explore matters of staging.

Teatro Nuovo's inaugural season continues through Aug. 5 with performances of *Tancredi*, *Tancredi refatto* – an alternate version assembled by Crutchfield incorporating lost material and a tragic ending written for Ferrara – and *Medea in Corinto* by [Giovanni Simone Mayr](#), Donizetti's teacher and a major star in his time. Midweek offerings include master classes and lectures, and chamber music, songs, and arias performed by Teatro Nuovo artists and apprentices. For ticket information, go [here](#).

*Susan Brodie writes about music, the arts, and life from New York City and Paris. Follow her at [@Susan Brodie](#) (Twitter) and [Toi Toi Toi!](#)*

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