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Medea in Corinto

PURCHASE, NY

Teatro Nuovo

7/29/18

ON JULY 29, Teatro Nuovo, the new venture by Will Crutchfield, revered *bel canto* conductor, scholar and former artistic director of the *Bel Canto at Caramoor* series, presented Giovanni Simone Mayr's rarely heard 1813 *Medea in Corinto* in a semi-concert version at Purchase College. The performance utilized period instruments and employed the same orchestral seating arrangement that would have been used in Italy near the time of the opera's premiere, but there was nothing stolid or preserved about the performance. Instead, Jonathan Brandani, *maestro al cembalo*, and concertmaster Jakob Lehmann led a pulsating, lively performance that mostly succeeded in spite of noticeable blemishes.

Written during the dawn of *bel canto*—Rossini's *Tancredi* and *L'Italiana in Algeri* had their premieres in the same year—*Medea in Corinto* acts as a link between the Classical and Romantic eras of opera. In *Medea in Corinto*, one can hear the purity of line of Mozart, hints of Rossini's dramatic orchestrations, and the marriage of drama, melody, and form that would later be perfected in the operas of Bellini and the early works of Giuseppe Verdi. The presence of these different stylistic elements does not mean that *Medea in Corinto* is a pastiche. In fact, *Medea in Corinto* is a remarkably taut union of music and theater that should be produced, or at least recorded, more often.

Teatro Nuovo had in its title role the soprano Jennifer Rowley, who rose to prominence after jumping into Alfano's *Cyrano de Bergerac* at the Met two seasons ago. Rowley is glamour personified and magnified, sometimes to the detriment of her portrayal here. Her soprano blossomed in the long lines and thrilling leaps of Medea's opening aria "Sommi Dei," softening to delicate *pianissimi* in Medea's tender moments with Giasone and her children, but Rowley's singing was too polished, too opulently affected to be believable in Medea's anger and lust for revenge. Rowley sang the music of *Medea in Corinto* beautifully, but the character of Medea never emerged. Similarly, tenor Derrek Stark, a 2018 Teatro Nuovo Resident Artist, was a heroic-voiced Giasone with high notes and stamina to spare but little in the way of dramatic urgency.

Perhaps Rowley and Stark, both significant talents, were thrown off by Teatro Nuovo's decision to present the opera as a semi-staged concert with singers and the chorus in concert dress. During solo arias and duets, the singers were left to their own devices, struggling to inhabit the imposing, often empty stage of the Purchase Performing Arts Center. Only one singer, tenor Mingjie Lei as Egeo, Prince of Athens, was able to fill the void with his boundless energy, passion, and easily produced lyric tenor. Lei, together with the Creusa of young soprano Teresa Castillo, who imbued the role's coloratura with equal turns ardor and unshakable dread, matched the energy and dramatic momentum of Brandani and Lehmann in the pit, which shaped this performance into the high stakes story of love and betrayal that *Medea in Corinto* truly is. The young mezzo-soprano Elena Snow as Medea's confidant Ismene also deserves recognition for her complete commitment to the drama, bringing focus and cohesion to the scenes in which she played a pivotal, if brief, role. —Steven Jude Tietjen