

Teatro Nuovo's Tancredi on Opening Night

JULY 31, 2018 IN REGIONAL EIGHTEEN NINETEE

It was an auspicious Opening Night for *Teatro Nuovo*, a new artistic organization composed of singers, instrumentalists, musical staff, coaches, scholars, and educators dedicated to presenting, and thereby preserving, the very best of Bel Canto singing and the opera repertory on which it thrived more than two centuries ago. Will Crutchfield and his team have moved on from two decades of Bel Canto at Caramoor, decades during which audiences, I included, were privileged to hear the cream of a repertory too often neglected on the major opera stages nowadays. *Teatro Nuovo*'s mission is to train talented young singers and orchestra members, many of whom are currently performing in the world's finest opera houses, in the style of Bel Canto singing and playing.

In this inaugural season at the Performing Arts Center at Purchase College, Purchase, NY, *Teatro Nuovo* presents a week of performance and educational events bracketed by two weekends of concert performances of two complete operas. Well, actually two and a half. And the first weekend has just passed.

Rossini's *melodramma eroico Tancredi* was the opera featured on Opening Night. But also premiering on this festive evening were the conspicuous changes to the orchestra's leadership, to the period instruments used, even to the seating arrangement of the pit. These decisions were fueled by *Teatro Nuovo*'s firm dedication to an authentic early 19th century Italian style of making music. Suffice it to say, the results were quite exciting.



Tamara Mumford is the heroic Tancredi in Rossini's *Tancredi*

Tancredi here is semi-staged, meaning the characters interact in an expressive manner, though without costumes, props, or set, come on, the set changes can be especially problematic because they often cause time consuming pauses in the action, such as it is. Without sets the empty stage of the Prison Scene looks remarkably like the Sicilian Mountain Region with Rivers. But truth is one quickly overlooks these aspects and one doesn't much

miss the helmets, swords and robes either: the males, principals and chorus (there is no female chorus in this one) wear tuxedos; the females wear concert apparel appropriate to their character's rank and station.

As our hero Tancredi, a nobleman of the early 11th century Syracuse, a warrior in exile, mezzo Tamara Mumford wore black pants, a white blouse, jewelry to signify her nobility, and heels, all with nothing to conceal her abundant flowing locks of hair. Here, unlike in most of her smaller roles at the Met, she's allowed to show her stuff. And wow, show it she does indeed! The depth of her lower register and the flexibility she manifests throughout her range are remarkable. Her Tancredi can be extraverted and bold or at times introverted and pensive; the ambiguity of her feelings for her beloved, wrongfully wrought by fake news, could be seen in her changing faces and postures. Yet Mumford's singing remained expressive throughout.



Amanda Woodbury as Amenaide in Rossini's *Tancredi*

She and Amanda Woodbury, as Amenaide, Tancredi's true love, brought the house down in the duet ***Fiero incontro! E che vuoi?*** toward the end of Act II. They, certainly we, knew it was spectacular. The two singers returned to the stage, out of character, bowing to acknowledge each other and the long and loud applause. Their sheer joy in singing together was conspicuous. Bravi!!

It's true today this sort of behavior in the middle of a performance on an opera stage doesn't fly. I mean, imagine applauding, let alone stopping the performance to take a bow after Otello's entrance in ***Otello*** (Verdi's, of course) or the singer coming to the footlights after performing Siegfried's Death scene in ***Götterdämmerung!*** But in the Bel Canto era of ***Tancredi***, if one sought a sublime and moving rendition of Tancredi's opening recitative ***O patria!—dolce, e ingrata patria!*** one wanted Pasta, not sets and swords. And one wanted to applaud and scream, maybe even demand an encore, in hopes the singer would add new, more adventuresome coloratura. ***La Voce*** was the thing to set before the King, plot be damned.

But I digress.

Tancredi returns to Syracuse in disguise to reclaim the land taken from his family. Coincidentally, Amenaide, who fell in love with him in Byzantium, has written a letter to beg his return to her and his homeland. She is the daughter of Argirio, the head of another noble family in Syracuse. Amanda Woodbury met every high expectation I brought with me this evening: she soars through the coloratura with spot-on accuracy and fluidity and daring, but also can descend into dramatic despair. Savor her singing. Brava!



Santiago Ballerini as Argirio

Santiago Ballerini is forceful, manly, yet introspective in his role as Argirio, which makes his admirable and florid singing dramatically interesting as well as pleasing. I look forward to hearing him in *Otello* (Rossini's, of course). Argirio, to be fair, doesn't know that Amenaide loves Tancredi. For that matter he probably doesn't even know he is alive, nor does he know that she has covertly sent for him. So to cement a common purpose against the Saracens, Argirio has given her in marriage to Orbazzano, another nobleman in Syracuse.

Orbazzano has intercepted Amenaide's letter, which he interprets as her attempt to meet up with and wed Solamir, the Saracen ruler. Jilted, an enraged Orbazzano demands her execution for treason, also possibly to make a little more tender the hurt from her rejection of his suit. Leo Radosavljevic is a smooth and dark Orbazzano. The plot hangs in the letter. I won't want to ruin the story, but if Amenaide had fessed up about the letter in the first place, read it out loud to all assembled...well, the opera would be a lot shorter.

Isaura, a noblewoman of Syracuse, is emotionally sung by Hannah Ludwig; Roggiero, Tancredi's esquire, is taken by Stephanie Sanchez. The Teatro Nuovo Chorus, all male in *Tancredi*, was comprised of members of the 2018 Teatro Nuovo Apprentice Artists.





Jakob Lehmann, First Violin, and Will Crutchfield lead the Opera Nuovo Orchestra

Equally significant nods to the Bel Canto tradition were not only the use of original period instruments but also through the divisions of leadership of the orchestra and the placement of the players. Will Crutchfield is *maestro al cembalo*, seated in the center of the pit, playing his harpsichord as well as coordinating and cuing the singers on stage. Jakob Lehmann, *primo violino e capo d'orchestra* led the orchestra with a crisp and agile bow; I assume Hilary Metzger, principal Cellist, was the *Violoncello al cembalo*. *Teatro Nuovo* followed the seating plan from *Teatro San Carlo* in Naples at the time of Rossini's directorship of the theater (which closely followed the premiere of Mayr's *Medea in Corinto* there in 1813). The players are distributed differently from today's orchestra, such that the orchestral sound is more evenly distributed throughout the house; the period instruments, redistribution of the players and the agility of the playing made for an exciting soundscape.

All in all, *Teatro Nuovo's Tancredi* is a distinctly moving experience, certainly for the passion of its music and vocals and their performance, but also for the total package: the Bel Canto orchestra with period instruments, the seating arrangement in the pit, the overall ambiance...the acoustics in the hall were ample, the sound evenly distributed. This was especially noticeable from the side on which I sat: no sense of hearing only half of the music, in other words. And there were musical interludes of course one doesn't hear if one plays only the arias or duets.

But, to repeat, very conspicuous was the joy all the players evidenced in their performances. I came away smiling a lot. Don't miss it.

Tancredi is performed as written in two acts with one intermission. The total evening is about three and a half hours.

Reviewed performance: Saturday evening, July 28, 2018.

Photos by Steven Pisano

The remaining performance schedule @ *Teatro Nuovo*, the Bel Canto Festival at Purchase College, entitled The Dawn of Romantic Opera is as follows:

Tonight, Tuesday, July 31 at 7:30 p.m. *Parlami d'amore* (Speak to me of Love!). Bel Canto in popular Italian song.

Wednesday, August 1 at 5:30 p.m. Oldest Voices; Newest Voices: recordings of great singers of the past as well as Role Preparation by today's soon to be great singers. Free to the public.

Thursday, August 2 at 7:30 p.m. Bel Canto Da Camera: Chamber music gems

Friday, August 3 at 7 p.m. Rossini's *Tancredi*, the original Venice version, starring Tamara Mumford, Sydney Mancasola, and Santiago Ballerini.

Saturday, August 4 at 7 p.m. Mayr's *Medea in Corinto*, starring Jennifer Rowley, Teresa Costillo, Derrek Stark, and Mingjie Lei.

Sunday, August 5 at 6 p.m. Rossini: *Tancredi rifatto*, starring Aleks Romano, Christine Lyons, and David Margulis. It is the version of the opera with the Ferrara ending and other changes after the world premiere.

Tickets range in price from \$30 to \$120. They may be purchased online at www.teartonuovo.org or by phone through the Performing Arts Center Box Office at 914.251.6200, Wednesday through Friday, noon to 6 p.m. Ample outdoor free parking is available at the Performing Arts Centre at Purchase College, which is located off Anderson Hill Road, just north of the Merritt Parkway. Light refreshments and tables are available as well.

Support your local opera. Especially when it is so excellent.