

Purchase

For 20 years, the conductor, musicologist and (former) critic Will Crutchfield oversaw a mostly bel canto opera series at the summer Caramoor Festival, north of New York. Caramoor has lovely gardens and a loyal audience. But Crutchfield felt constrained, so as of this past summer he has moved his operation a few miles south to PURCHASE COLLEGE, part of the State University of New York system. His new TEATRO NUOVO festival has several advantages over Caramoor. It's closer to New York City. Its performances take place in a real theatre, the Concert Hall, indoors with 1,450 seats and a pit, a proper stage, wing and fly space. (At Caramoor he had to make do in a tent.) The brutalist Purchase theatre complex lacks charm, but it contains four spaces with decent acoustics. It is best remembered by New Yorkers as the site 30 years ago of the much-admired Pepsico Summerfare, where among other sterling events Peter Sellars staged the three Mozart-Da Ponte operas.

As at Caramoor but more lavishly, Crutchfield offered opera performances with fine young singers, smaller-scaled concerts and panel discussions, plus a six-week coaching and training regimen for the younger singers, the public portion spread over two weekends and the intervening week. This summer's overall programme was entitled 'The Dawn of Romantic Opera' and ingeniously paired two masterpieces from 1813: Rossini's *Tancredi*, his first big hit, and Mayr's *Medea in Corinto*, which on the basis of this performance has been grievously neglected (every time it's revived people feel the same, but then it disappears again). As a footnote on the second weekend, Crutchfield

appended a single offering he called *Tancredi rifatto*, with a different cast, consisting of a complete performance but with all the alternate arias Rossini made after the first performance. I had to miss that.

Overall, the new surroundings and funding (presumably in-progress, although the theatre was not full either weekend) made for obvious improvements. The operas were fascinating, the indoor acoustics superior, the performances musically impressive. The biggest plus was the nearly 50-strong period-instrument orchestra. The minus was that while the performances had been billed as semi-staged, they were basically concerts. The chorus carried scores; the solo singers did not. The stage was bare and the attire modern-dress. The all-male chorus in *Tancredi* looked robotic, marching on and off. In *Medea* there was more interaction among the characters, and the chorus entrances and exits looked more natural. The only visual effect was changing colours illuminating the rear scrim.

Period niceties abounded. The singers' lines were ornamented, but not obtrusively. Crutchfield replicated the orchestral seating of the Teatro San Carlo in Naples, the site of the Rossini premiere. Conducting duties were divided between Jakob Lehmann, the concertmaster, and Crutchfield as 'maestro al cembalo' in the Rossini, with Jonathan Brandani assuming that role in the Mayr. On the whole, the orchestral precision was good and the playing of the brass instruments secure. The Mayr had more urgency; things positively zipped along. One wondered to what extent the instrumentalists, encouraged to be responsive to one another and the stage, were following the singers and how much the singers were following the conductors.

About *Tancredi* the opera, even with all its alternate arias and scenes, little need be said at this point. How the *rifatto* versions compare with the originals, I could not say; a firmer knowledge of the score and manuscripts would be required to make telling comparisons. In general, there is a fine line between revelatory period sensitivity and pedantry. On the whole, Crutchfield stays on the enlightened side of that line.

Tancredi itself, seen on August 3, offered the mezzo Tamara Mumford in the title role. She sounded beautiful though lacking the manly authority Marilyn Horne brought to the part. Amanda Woodbury was Amenaide. Her lovely soprano makes her a rising Met star (she is scheduled to succeed Pretty Yende as Leïla in *Les Pêcheurs de perles* this season). The bass-baritone Leo Radosavljevic was Orbazzano, the bad guy.

Santiago Ballerini, an Argentine tenor who has had success in Donizetti and Bellini at Caramoor, was Argirio, and for me raised an issue. Perhaps Rossini's most famous quotation was his dismissal of Duprez taking high notes from the chest as sounding like 'the squawk of a capon with its throat being cut'. Ballerini sang his high notes from the chest, and sang them well, but he was no Nourrit, whose head tones Rossini preferred. What to do today? If Crutchfield stuck to his period-practice guns, he'd cast tenors using head voice. But would modern audiences accept what they might hear as weak? A tough question. Tougher still: if Crutchfield can raise funds to stage his operas, will he attempt a period production?

Medea in Corinto rises to gripping drama, fully equal to Cherubini's earlier version. A pity Callas didn't champion the Mayr, instead or in addition. In the title role we had Jennifer Rowley, who is making quite a career for herself on her own and at the Met as a second-cast stalwart, this season scheduled to follow Radvanovsky as Tosca and Netrebko as Adriana Lecouvreur. On August 4 she sang fiercely if not always gracefully. The rest of

the cast was solid: Teresa Castillo as Creusa, Derrek Stark as Giasone, William Lee Bryan as Creonte and the tenor Mingjie Lei, especially, as Egeo.

JOHN ROCKWELL