Crutchfield's Teatro Nuovo begins life with a pair of bel canto rarities

By Charles T. Downey July 30, 2018

Tamara Mumford and Amanda Woodbury in Rossini's "Tancredi" at Teatro Nuovo in Purchase, NY. Photo: Steven Pisano

For twenty years Will Crutchfield led an accomplished bel canto opera series as part of the summer festival at Caramoor. Last summer, by mutual consent they parted ways, Crutchfield looking to expand his program and Caramoor wanting to spend its resources differently.

The distinguished American conductor opened the first season of his new venture, Teatro Nuovo, this weekend in the Performing Arts Center at Purchase College.

The new venue may lose the charm competition with Caramoor's semi-outdoor Venetian Theater, but its advantages include air conditioning and more comfortable seating. The hall itself is elegant and spacious, with a resonant acoustic amenable to both small and full sounds. (Based on direct comparison the center of the floor level offers much better listening than the more echo-prone sides.)

The SUNY campus in Westchester County, Purchase is closer to New York City than Caramoor, but the festival may take some time to establish an audience for these concert performances. At both Rossini's *Tancredi* on Saturday night and Johann Simon Mayr's *Medea in Corinto* on Sunday afternoon, the house was shockingly undersold.

If you liked what Crutchfield did at Caramoor, though, chances are you will love this even more. Both operas in his maiden season are obscure

as expected but entirely worth discovering. The casts, also in keeping with the Caramoor years, are a pleasing combination of more established young stars and fresh discoveries.

The wildly successful debut of *Tancredi* in 1813 made Rossini's name and inspired multiple versions in later revivals. It is a story of medieval knights, drawn not from Tasso as the title might suggest, but from a play by Voltaire. Argirio, head of a leading family of Syracuse on Sicily, betroths his daughter, Amenaide, to Orbazzano to make a pact with his rival family. Amenaide wants to marry Tancredi, son of the city's third rival family, now in exile, while the leader of the Saracens, currently besieging the city, also seeks her hand.

Amanda Woodbury, a soprano who made at least one stunning debutlast year, displayed a limpid tone across a broad vocal range as Amenaide, able to run crisply through challenging fioriture. Impeccable intonation and a cushioned approach to every note made her melancholy prison scene in Act II exquisite.

As Tancredi, Tamara Mumford's plummy, viscous mezzo-soprano paired beautifully with Woodbury in their two gorgeous duets. Mumford's chest voice was appropriately virile for this trouser role, extending well down into the male range. She commanded the stage imperiously, most memorably in her striking entrance aria, "O patria!"

Tenor Santiago Ballerini deployed his sharp-edged tenor to aptly arrogant effect as Argirio, with ringing high notes. Mezzo-sopranos Hannah Ludwig and Stephanie Sanchez, both drawn from Crutchfield's training program, impressed with rich, resonant voices in the supporting cast.

Simon (or Simone) Mayr, Bavarian-born director of music at the Cathedral of Bergamo, exerted considerable influence on the development of Italian opera. Not only did he compose some 70 operas in Italy, but he famously took on a young boy named Gaetano Donizetti as his student. He premiered *Medea in Corinto*, also in 1813, at the Teatro San Carlo in Naples, and it takes up the last horrors committed by the wife of Jason, after he has spurned her to wed Creusa, a princess in Corinth.

Jennifer Rowley, a young spitfire soprano on the ascent at the Metropolitan Opera, sang the role with vitriolic malevolence. Her sheer strength overwhelmed at times, but she also mollified that acidic power into a mellower, more covered sound. Her shrewd management of vocal tone served the drama well, making the character's alternation between hesitation and determination to slay her own children believable in the astounding final scene.

Resident singers were more overshadowed in this performance, but the supporting confidants of mezzo-soprano Elena Snow and baritone Junhan Choi made imposing sounds. The standout was tenor Mingjie Lei, with a mellifluous, floating sound as Egeo, the King of Athens, who nearly makes off with Creusa, spoiling Jason's plans. Apprentice singers in the program formed a well-drilled chorus, prepared by Derrick Goff, joining in the loosely organized acting of the singers on the bare stage.

The most important advance in Crutchfield's new project is in the orchestra. The Teatro Nuovo ensemble plays on period instruments modeled on those used in early 19th-century opera, with the pitch set at A430. The string players use gut strings, the brass instruments have no valves, and several of the woodwinds and a harp, played onstage in *Medea*, were designed or chosen especially for these operas.

Crutchfield has even adapted the seating arrangement of his orchestra from one used in the Teatro San Carlo in Naples, with the strings divided on both sides of the orchestra around the woodwinds and brass. Both the lead violinist, Jakob Lehmann of Eroica Berlin and other groups, and Crutchfield at a fortepiano took turns leading in *Tancredi*, a division of labor also found in Naples. Jonathan Brandani took the keyboard leadership role in *Medea*, and at both performances the musicians, looked collaboratively toward each other and the stage. (A prompter, placed discreetly at the center top of the orchestra, helped keep the singers on track.)

All of this is a technical way to explain the extraordinary sound of this orchestra: the chiffy hootiness of the wooden traverso flutes, the ember-like scintillas of sound from David Ross's tiny piccolo, the clotted-cream richness of Kristin Olson's English horn, the alternating stopped and open blasts from the horns. The conclusion of *Medea*, with its chthonic trombones and serpent (look that one up), show Mayr taking a page from *Don Giovanni* and then some. You have just one more weekend to hear it this summer.