

VOCE DI MECHE

Reviews of performing arts with emphasis on young artists and small opera companies.

We are here to encourage the development of gifted young singers and to stimulate the growth of New York City's invaluable chamber opera companies. But we will not neglect the Metropolitan Opera either. Get ready for bouquets and brickbats.

Sunday, August 5, 2018

ON HEROES AND MISSING LINKS



Christopher Bozeka, William Lee Bryan, Teresa Castillo, Jennifer Rowley, Derrek Stark, Mingjie Lie, Elena Snow, and Junhan Choi

The hero of Mayr's 1813 opera *Medea* is Giasone (Jason of the Golden Fleece) and he ain't our idea of a hero at all. More on that *anon*. For us, the hero of the evening was Will Crutchfield who has a mission of exploring *Bel Canto* opera--its traditions, and the radical implications of its history. In this mission, he has introduced us to several barely known and rarely produced operas. This summer he has moved from his lengthy stint at Caramoor to a

new home at Purchase College, for a summer festival entitled *Teatro Nuovo*.

Last night, his pre-opera lecture filled us in on "the missing link", i.e. how we got from Mozart to Rossini. How did Classical opera become Bel Canto? The question rests on the shoulders of one Giovanni Simone Mayr (*né* Johannes Simon Mayr in Bavaria). It is a strange mystery how such a seminal character is so ill-known today when he was all the rage in Italy from the end of the 18th c. on. He put down roots in Bergamo and had a three decade career from his initial commission by La Fenice in 1794, receiving commissions from La Scala in Milan and Teatro San Carlo in Naples. His operatic output numbers about 70!

In 1806 he opened a school and gave young Gaetano Donizetti all the knowledge he needed to become the next great star in the operatic firmament. He also had significant influence on Rossini and Bellini. Hearing his opera one was tempted to think he plagiarized them but he came first and his influence on them is clear.

Before Mayr, the tradition of *opera seria* involved a happy ending in which order is re-established. Was *Medea* the first serious opera in which people die? Subsequently, serious operas almost always involve death. In Mayr's operas, the number of set pieces is reduced but their development is enhanced by greater length and a variety of sections--*recitativ*, *cantabile*, and *cabaletta*. These tripartite arias now served a dramatic purpose and were no longer fungible. Furthermore, he changed the nature of the *recitativi* by using the orchestra, rather than the harpsichord as accompaniment.

The forms he used were Italian but he brought Germanic technique to them by the use of winds and the use of a chorus. Harmonies became more "modern" and orchestral colors became more, well, colorful.

Just as Maestro Crutchfield's lecture enhanced our appreciation of the opera, so did a minimal knowledge of the backstory. The eponymous heroine Medea is one Bad Girl. She has a long history of evil deeds, including murdering her brother. Her love for Jason kept her busy with misdeeds, ensuring his political success. Jason ain't no prize neither! After all Medea did for him, he has abandoned her and their two sons to enter into matrimony with Creusa, daughter of Creonte.

Guess who comes to spoil the wedding! Yes, it's Medea and she joins forces with Egeo, King of Athens, who has been spurned by Creusa. Hell hath no fury like a pair of scorned lovers acting in concert!

The singing last night was uniformly excellent. Resident Artists who failed to make much of an impression at Tuesday's recital dazzled us on the operatic stage. Guest Artist soprano Jennifer Rowley made a fiery Medea, grasping the audience with her entrance aria and an intense duet with Giasone. In Act II, when she summons her underworld demons (singing from outside the open side door of the theater) she made our blood run cold. Her revenge aria clearly showed the ambivalence she felt between her maternal instinct and her wish to torment Giasone.

Tenor Derrek Stark made a fine Giasone, even though it seemed unlikely that

his fickle romantic history would have made him a suitable husband for a Princess of Corinth! His tone was pleasing, as was his Italianate phrasing and his romantic duet with Creusa was lovely.

Creusa was performed by soprano Teresa Castillo whose performance of *azarzuela* aria we just reviewed a few days ago. She showed herself to be an incredibly versatile artist by completely changing the color of her voice to one of melting sweetness.

Tenor Mingjie Lei has a gorgeous instrument and used it well in his portrayal of Egeo. We had a sense that big roles will be coming his way.

Baritone William Lee Bryan sang the role of Creonte, King of Corinth whilst tenor Christopher Bozeka sang the role of Creonte's confidant Evandro. Both were excellent.

There are no small roles, as the say, and we were happy to hear baritone Junhan Choi as Tideo, a friend of Giasone. The role was, we believe, written for the tenor *fach*, but that seemed to present no problem for Mr. Choi. Mezzo-soprano Elena Snow also made the most of her portrayal of Medea's friend Ismene.

The Teatro Nuovo Chorus sang well under the direction of Derrick Goff and the Teatro Nuovo Orchestra played Mayr's accessible music with panache. Jonathan Brandani was Maestro al Cembalo and Jakob Lehmann served as Primo Violino e Capo d'Orchestra. The arrangement of the orchestra was the same as in *Tancredi*, reviewed last week. The violins could face each other and coordinate their bowing without a conductor on the podium. The period winds and brass were pure delight and we heard some memorable solos from flute and clarinet.

But the most special solo of all was at the beginning of Act II when harpist Frances Duffy delighted our ears with a lengthy onstage solo.

If we were to name one aspect of this *melodramma tragico* that disappointed, it would be the *libretto* by the otherwise wonderful Felice Romani, who adapted it from Euripides and Pierre Corneille. All the action happens offstage and the characters onstage just talk (sing) a lot. Of course, this was his earliest effort, as far as we can determine. He would get better!

(c) meche kroop