

Rage! Horror! Vengeance! Joy!

New York

Purchase (University Concert Hall)

07/29/2018 - & August 4, 2018

**Giovanni Simone Mayr: *Medea in Corinto***

Jennifer Rowley (Medea), Teresa Castillo (Creusa), Derrek Stark (Giasone), Mingjie Lei (Ergeo), William Lee Bryan (Creonte), Elena Snow (Ismene), Junhan Choi (Tideo), Christopher Bozeka (Evandro)

Teatro Nuovo Chorus, Derrick Goff (Chorus Master), Jonathan Brandani (Harpsichord), Teatro Nuovo Orchestra, Jakob Lehmann (Concertmaster, Conductor)

Will Crutchfield (General and Artistic Director, Moderator), Cynthia Hennon Marino (Production Stage Manager)



W. Crutchfield/J. Lehmann (© Opera Musica/Franck Juárez/Alpha Classics)

“...always dramatic, always sings, always is melodic.”

Gioachino Rossini, on Giovanni Simone Mayr, quoted by Will Crutchfield

Who was Giovanni Simone Mayr? And why haven't we heard more of this astonishing composer? His bloodthirsty opera, *Medea in Corinth* was produced the same year as Rossini's *Tancredi* and a few months before Beethoven's *Fidelio*. But, from the Teatro Nuovo production at Purchase University yesterday, Mayr has taken the best of them both (or at least Rossini's *dramatic* operas) and created a *bel canto* masterpiece.

No, this opera is not idiosyncratically original. Those who know their opera can hear parts of Beethoven in the very long overture, they listen to early Verdi (and even the *Aidatriumphal* march). He was famous on his own in Italy, but—as a transplanted German—never really got into Central Europe. Apparently, according to scholar/conductor Will Crutchfield, he was as prolific and fast as Mozart (composing 70 operas amongst many other works), he sacrificed ambition for comfort, he sacrificed time by coaching the poorer young people of Italy.

And Mayr was Donizetti's only teacher. But if you heard the long ending *scena* when Medea broils her rival with a borrowed cloak and then kills her two children, you can hear the *Lucia* Mad Scene without any trouble.

This production at Teatro Nuovo has almost everything going for it. The voices are superb, the orchestral score—with a mammoth early 19th Century opera orchestra—resounds through the Purchase Concert Hall. And instead of a conductor, one had the excellent Concertmaster, Jakob Lehmann, both performing and leading a group which included a serpent, an 18th Century bugle, a mixture of old and new string instruments, and brass choirs to signal the most melodramatic scenes.

Did San Carlo in Naples do with simply a concertmaster in 1813? Mr. Crutchfield knows all, but that was a surprise for me.

Nor did Mayr or his young librettist, Felice Romani, stint on the horror and revenge of the story. In fact, “Horror” “Revenge”, “Hate” and “Vengeance” are repeated endlessly by the characters. As that wicked Greek dramatist Euripides, laid it out, the sorceress Medea was thrown out of bed (and Corinth) by Jason, after she bore him children. When he married Creusa, the daughter of Corinth’s king, Medea calls up her favorite demons, she poisons the bride-to-be, knifes the children, and then—since Euripides was in no mood for a happy ending—Medea rides away with some friendly dragons, leaving Jason *quite* unhappy.

The librettist added another character, an Athenian prince, who was *supposed* to marry Creusa, but nobody told him the change of plans. So he and Medea plot a double revenge.

Alas, this production was “semi”-staged, which meant no bloody knife, no bloody cloak and no sacrificed children. But forget that. The music itself was an unending series of tense arias and choruses.



T.Castillo/J.Rowley (© Kaleigh Rae Photography/OperaWire.com)

We begin with a happy wedding song immediately interrupted by Creusa, fearful that Medea is still lurking about, ready for revenge. We go onto Jason’s song of victory, of Medea/Jason duets—pure accusations—and then onto the grisly finale.

All in two remorseless acts. And with almost all of the principals singing luscious, well-

trained and emotionally draining *bel canto*. No, nothing stuck to me, no arias were “Figaro” or “La donna e mobile”, but in the original production, they were probably encored and perhaps were more immediately popular.

We start not with Jennifer Rowley’s Medea, but that poor princess Teresa Castillo’s Creusa. Medea is a one-profile sorceress/savage. Ms. Castillo makes her princess not only a sympathetic character but one filled with joy and misgivings, a full-blooded soprano darting up and down the scale without fear.

Ms. Rowley’s last great scene could have been played by Callas (as she did in Cherubini’s *Medea*), but Jennifer Rowley doesn’t have to play second fiddle. This was superb singing, taking in the whole depth and breadth of the savage eponymous savage. Not simply foul, but one who relishes killing her rivals, with contradictory thoughts about killing the kids.

When she calls up her demons, the ghostly orchestral sounds rival Weber’s nightmare orchestra. When she sings to Jason, “You are unworthy to witness the rage of Medea,” we shudder.

Derrek Stark’s Jason (here “Giasone”), along with others in the cast, showed the experience, the confidence, the full range of *bel canto* technique. Not weak links in the singing at all.

What brought this otherwise tight production down was that no attention was paid to the acting. And, as anyone who sees opera in Naples knows, the acting is vital.

Not that we wanted Stanislavski/Strasberg naturalism or exaggerated *verismo* acting. But when Jason makes his victorious appearance, singing of his new father-in-law or new bride, he doesn’t even glance at them. When the otherwise excellent Mingjie Lei as the scorned Athenian prince sings his monologue, the movements seem stilted.

Small attentions to these movements—and perhaps the addition of a few props—might have given more strength to the Mayr music and more tautness to a stage production obviously supervised by that solon of Baroque music, Will Crutchfield.

In the short run (the only other production is on August 4), these are minor problems. Chorus, orchestra, and soloists have offered an opera easily rivalling Cherubini’s masterpiece. Mr. Crutchfield had mentioned that Mayr’s final opera might have been his best, and I am anxious to see and hear it.

In the meantime, *Medea in Corinto* was not only the acid antidote to the Handel operatic sweetness at Caramoor this summer, but an opera which is tragic, melodramatic and absolutely gripping.

Harry Rolnick