

Teatro Nuovo Opens Its Inaugural Season

By [George Loomis](#), Musical America

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PURCHASE, New York—Not to slight the fine singing, but the thing most likely to strike first-time visitors to Teatro Nuovo—conductor Will Crutchfield’s new and expanded successor to his Bel Canto at Caramoor series, now in its debut season—is the newly formed period-instrument orchestra of nearly 50 players. With it, Teatro Nuovo claims to become the first venture in the U.S. to present 19th-century Italian opera on period instruments.

The orchestra added considerable luster to last weekend’s performances of Rossini’s *Tancredi* (July 28) and Giovanni Simone Mayr’s *Medea in Corinto* (July 29). The choice of operas has a certain logic for a startup in bel canto, since *Tancredi* was Rossini’s first great success and, as such, might be thought of as launching the era; Mayr’s opera dates from the same year.

As Crutchfield describes it, “Teatro Nuovo” refers to a new “quest to rediscover forgotten strands of [Italian] tradition.”

The orchestra is the most visible innovation, but the training program has been substantially boosted with new faculty members and an expanded pool of young singers. Performances take place in SUNY Purchase’s Performing Arts Center, which opera goers with long memories will recall as the locale of the young Peter Sellars’s staging of the Mozart-Da Ponte operas back in the 1980s.

The hall may lack the rustic charm of Caramoor’s Venetian Theater, but it is an improvement otherwise, since it offers protection against hostile weather as well as modern stage accouterments. The latter, however, were not especially availed of, for Teatro Nuovo clearly made the decision to initially allocate its resources primarily toward the music: The new orchestra couldn’t have come cheap.

Soloists, wearing concert attire, act out their parts on a stage that benefits from simple shifts in lighting but is otherwise devoid of scenery. Apart from the chorus, singers have their parts memorized, so that the action comes across at least as well as in, say, some “concept”-oriented modern stagings. It enables a period-practice arrangement with the performers in close proximity to the instrumentalists, who were in a pit raised almost to stage level. According to a note by Crutchfield, the players were deployed in accordance with a plan from Naples’s San Carlo Theater dating from shortly after the premiere of *Medea* there. In an era predating the modern conductor, the ability of performers to see each other and interact helped facilitate a “shared responsibility” for the outcome of the evening.

Here conducting responsibilities were divided between the “maestro al cembalo” (keyboard maestro) and the “primo violino e capo d’orchestra” (concertmaster). Crutchfield, at a period piano, functioned in the former capacity for *Tancredi* as did Jonathan Brandani for *Medea*, with Jakob Lehmann serving as concertmaster for both. It wasn’t clear to me the exact basis for splitting up the duties, but ensemble glitches were minor and the kind of interaction Crutchfield aimed for did seem to produce results. A fresh, assertive, vibrant sound was present as well, despite occasional blemishes of intonation, and there was some outstanding solo playing from Lehmann, Thomas Carroll (clarinet), and Kristin Olson (English horn).

Neither *Tancredi* nor *Medea* is a true rarity, but it was certainly rare to hear these works from the same year in close proximity with each other. You could sense the melodic freshness that made

Rossini's opera an instant hit, whereas Mayr, Rossini's senior by nearly 30 years, was more apt to rely on Mozart-like formulations, although there are those in Rossini too. *Medea* has a tighter libretto by the young Felice Romani, whereas the climax of Gaetano Rossi's for *Tancredi*—the title character's defeat of his rival Orbazzano in single combat, which establishes his beloved Amenaide's innocence—comes so soon in Act 2 that much of the rest, particularly Tancredi's continued doubts over Amenaide's fidelity, seems anticlimactic.

As always with *Tancredi*, the issue of whether to use the happy or tragic finale—Rossini wrote both—arose. I find the tragic one rather boring musically and was, well, happy to hear the happy one. An opportunity to hear the alternative will be provided on August 5, when Crutchfield et al. offer *Tancredi rifatto* (*Tancredi remade*), using the tragic ending and other variants Rossini prepared after the premiere. In case anyone wonders, the finale of *Medea* is anything but happy.

The singers were highly prepared and, with rare exceptions, sang with cultivated phrasing, expressive dynamic contrasts, and stylish ornamentation. Some need to work on doing more with words. None indulged in the lamentable practice of leaving out notes as the final cadence of an aria or duet approaches, imposing a big ritard and singing an unwritten high note. This comparatively recent phenomenon has become so prevalent that often a qualified singer won't be hired unless he or she can sing an unwritten high note audiences have been conditioned to expect.

In *Tancredi* Tamara Mumford brought firm tone and a noble bearing to the title role in a fine portrayal. Amanda Woodbury's pure-voiced soprano and expressive manner strikingly brought out the poignancy of Amenaide's sufferings, yet Woodbury also sparkled in the role's florid music. Santiago Ballerini made important moments of Argirio's two splendid arias.

In the Mayr work, Jennifer Rowley's richly resonant soprano contributed mightily to a full throttle performance as Medea, the jilted sorceress who kills her own children out of vengeance. In an opera with two major tenor roles, Derrek Stark, wearing a silver dinner jacket and singing strongly, projected smug confidence as Medea's erstwhile husband Giasone, while Mingjie Lei excelled in the lyricism of Egeo's music. William Lee Bryan sang Creonte with a notably handsome baritone.

With such singers as Mumford, Woodbury, and Rowley on the Metropolitan Opera roster, one hopes that the stylishness they demonstrated here will rub off on their colleagues.

Pictured: Jennifer Rowley, who sings the title role of *Medea in Corinto*

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