

Jennifer Rowley and Cast Conjure Magic in Barebones Production

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This review is for the performance on Sunday, July 29, 2018.

Beginning on Saturday, July 28, 2018, Teatro Nuovo's Bel Canto Festival has opened with their production of Rossini's "Tancredi." The festival aims to showcase seldom-seen works that are able to enchant audiences, and their production of Giovanni Simone Mayr's "Medea in Corinto," does that and more.

Due to being a relatively obscure opera, there is not an abundance of recordings and resources available for one to immerse themselves within. Fortunately, Teatro Nuovo's artistic and general director William Crutchfield held a pre-performance lecture which delves into the historical and musical context surrounding this work, including much of this information in the festival's program.

In Crutchfield's words, "Premiering at the Teatro San Carlo in 1813, 'Medea in Corinto' is arguably the composer's largest theatrical success. His librettist, the 25-year old Felice Romani, later a frequent collaborator with Bel Canto's more storied names of Rossini,

Bellini, Donizetti, and Verdi, found the source of his libretto in the well-known, vengeance-laden myths of Euripides and Corneille. However, he added a further layer to the misery as Creusa's engagement to Egeo has faded into a new and forthcoming union with Giasone. Leading that first performance were the singing anchors of this corner of the repertoire: frequent Rossini muse, Isabella Colbran (title role), Andrea Nozzari (Giasone), and Manuel Garcia (Egeo). In January of 1823, the celebrated soprano Giuditta Pasta debuted 'Medea' in Paris and integrated the role into her repertoire as a cornerstone, earning rave reviews for her gripping, dramatic characterization. Her celebrated successes of 'Medea in Corinto' afforded a longer life for the title on the world's stages, even as Mayr began to be eclipsed by the next generation."

Semi-staged but Wholly Passionate

This production, while lacking for a set and props, was carried along by the sheer emotion found not only within the plot of Felice Romani's libretto, but within the interpretations of the artists themselves. This resulted in much of the unfolding drama being left to the imagination, fueled by the score and rapturous singing. Given its mythical setting, some events within the opera, such as the battle between Giasone and Egeo's armies which occurs between acts, and Creusa's death by poisoned robe, so potent it reduces her to ashes, are understandably left offstage. The tragic ending, which would have seen Medea making her escape from Corinth in a chariot pulled by dragons, would no doubt take efforts one would expect from works as grandiose as Wagner's "Das Rheingold." That being said, some sense of location would have aided scenes such as when Egeo is freed from prison, or when Medea sings over whether or not to kill her own children.

All Are Punished

In the title role, Jennifer Rowley was a force of nature from beginning to end. In her first appearance, Medea learns that she has been cast aside by Giasone for Creusa, daughter of the king of Corinto. Scorned and indignant, Rowley's nascent conflict is captured by the ambivalence of the recitative *accompagnato* before she launches into a *cavatina*, where she invokes divine retribution to avenge her broken marital vows, leading to a sonorous climax with the line "If thou art a God, arise!" Despite all her fury, in her following scene with Giasone, Rowley implores and even tempts him into honoring their wedlock; her line "Say the word and the world is yours," has echoes of Satan tempting Christ on Mount Hermon, and alludes to the hell she would rain during the second act. This emotional struggle between husband and wife results in their duet "Cedi al destin, Medea." While this number showed that they still bore some sympathy for one another, the sweet dissonance of their closing phrases suggested their inability to see eye to eye. After her failed attempt to reclaim Giasone by force, Medea turns to infernal powers to wreak her revenge in the aria "antica notte." The sulfur and brimstone Rowley conjured in this number was fittingly complimented not only by the abyssal bowing of the double bass, but by an *obligato* from members of the orchestra's brass section, who had left the auditorium minutes before to play their part from outside, thus giving the sense of subterranean distance.

As Giasone, leader of the mythical Argonauts, Derrek Stark deftly portrayed the ancient hero with no shortage of nuance. While Giasone's actions within the opera are far from

noble, casting Medea aside for a more politically convenient bride, Stark's portrayal made it clear that he was not without mercy. When he makes his first entrance, Stark delivers an extended melisma that exudes valor, and while he and the chorus assures Creusa that the nuptials will go off without a hitch, his interactions with Tideo and Medea herself reveals his knowledge that he is not the one in control of the surrounding circumstances. While Stark's time on the stage was mostly comprised of duets or ensemble numbers, that only made his elation, and later heartbreak, all the more public; especially when just after Creusa's murder, the chorus bearing the horrible news enters by flanking Giasone on both sides, surrounding him in his own sorrow.

As the princess Creusa, soprano Teresa Castillo brought with her a merciful, pious flair that, while resulting in her death and that of Giasone's children, did not feel like naivety. Her own extended vocal entrance came just a beat before the wedding chorus finished their assurances, as if she were bolstering herself on their belief in future joy. At the start of the second act, there's an extended solo from a harp on stage and elevated from the rest of the orchestra, which returns to compliment the silvery tones in Castillo's recitatives.

Finishing the two pairs of conflicting lovers was tenor Mingjie Lei as Egeo, king of Athens. While Medea's prior crimes may partially justify her being cast aside, Egeo's engagement was called off with him being the last to find out about it. Rejected, vulnerable, and hurt, Lei's aria "Alfine io vi riveggo" was full of gentle strength that was in no way diminished by the preceding duet between Medea and Giasone. It was highly satisfying to see Egeo and Medea join together as jilted lovers, though towards the beginning of the act one finale "Dolce figliuol d'Urania," Lei's lines sounded restrained among the ensemble; noticeable mostly due to the line that was sung being "My heart cannot contain such horror." Despite this, Lei carried a regal bearing no less than Giasone and King Creonte, even when imprisoned.

A Westchester Treasure

Overall, I was highly taken with the opera's mythical setting, perspective, and of course, the music. Despite these enticing elements and the artists which breathed life into them, many seats within the orchestra section of the audience were unfilled, an absence made all the more apparent given that the performance was easily worthy of opera's more prominent theaters. The venue of Teatro Nuovo's production, the concert hall of Westchester's Suny Purchase College, is something of a remote gem; were it not for the buses which took audience members from Lincoln Center and back after the performance, I likely would not have been able to attend. Adding further to this dilemma is the relative obscurity of the opera and its composer, Giovanni Simone Mayr, who was a contemporary of such overshadowing figures as Beethoven and Mozart. Despite a prolific career as a composer, Mayr's operas, along with those of other composers, would unfortunately be eclipsed by the works of men such as Rossini, his student Donizetti, and Verdi. Mayr's contributions to the performing arts would influence Romanticism and the rise of bel canto, and it is through these influences that "Medea in Corinto" has managed to interest lovers of opera and survive to the present day.