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## [OPERA REVIEW](#)

### **‘The Dawn of Romantic Opera’ Review: Subtle, Playful Performances**

Launching Teatro Nuovo’s first season, a period-instrument ensemble brings color and articulation to ‘Tancredi’ and ‘Medea in Corinto.’



Jennifer Rowley as Medea in ‘Medea in Corinto’ PHOTO: STEVEN PISANO

*By*

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*Purchase, N.Y.*

After 20 years of exploring bel canto operas at Caramoor, the conductor Will Crutchfield has embarked on a new venture, Teatro Nuovo, a summer training program for singers at Purchase College. Its initial Bel Canto Festival, dubbed “The Dawn of Romantic Opera,” opened last weekend with two semi-staged operas from 1813. The more familiar one, “Tancredi,” was Gioachino Rossini’s first big hit; “Medea in Corinto,” by Giovanni Simone Mayr, made a fascinating companion piece. Mayr, then one of Europe’s dominant opera composers, was, in a way, the missing link between Mozart and Rossini, who would soon supplant him as the ruler of the opera realm.

The most exciting—and entirely novel—aspect of the festival was the Teatro Nuovo Orchestra: a large period-instrument ensemble made up of natural brasses, early woodwinds, and gut-strung string instruments. The players were arranged, following the early 19th-century plan of the Teatro San Carlo in Naples, so that the players sat in a wide oval, with half the violinists facing the stage rather than being oriented toward a single conductor. The concertmaster, violinist Jakob Lehmann, led the orchestra, and the keyboard player (Mr. Crutchfield in “Tancredi”; Jonathan Brandani in “Medea”) gave cues to the singers. The orchestra pit was raised to situate the band

just below the stage, creating a closer relationship between players and singers than is usual today.

The effect was transformative: These superb players brought to early 19th-century opera the kind of color and articulation that has become standard in Handel historical performance. Instead of bombast and sheen, we got subtlety and playfulness. Solo players like Mr. Lehmann, Thomas Carroll, the principal clarinet, and Joseph Monticello, the principal flute were as exciting as the singers. Both operas will be repeated next weekend (there are other events throughout the week as well), and anyone who cares about historical performance should not miss the chance to hear this band.

Available production funds clearly went to the orchestra: The singers, in concert dress, did some rudimentary acting on the large, empty stage. The four major roles (three in “Tancredi,” one in “Medea”) were performed by experienced guest artists; resident and apprentice singers took the other roles and formed the chorus.

In “Tancredi,” the impressive trio of principals included mezzo Tamara Mumford as the exiled Tancredi, who secretly returns to his home in Syracuse only to find his beloved Amenaide (soprano Amanda Woodbury), daughter of Argirio (tenor Santiago Ballerini), falsely accused of consorting with the Saracen enemy and sentenced to death. Ms. Mumford’s velvety mezzo, deep low extension, and fluidity of line expressively united Romantic and bel canto vocal virtues in a single voice. Ms. Woodbury matched her handsomely, with a big, clean sound and accurate pitch. Mr. Ballerini was bright and vehement in Act I; he brought more variety and feeling to Act II, when Argirio realizes he has to execute his own daughter. Of the resident artists singing smaller roles, Hannah Ludwig stood out as Isaura, her mellow, handsome mezzo complemented by the exquisite solo playing of Mr. Carroll, the clarinetist, in her one aria. Mr. Crutchfield and cellist Hilary Metzger supplied the robust continuo for the recitatives.

Mayr’s orchestration for “Medea” had more layers and colors (as well as trombones, extra horns, and a serpent, an archaic brass instrument), and when Medea invoked the spirits of hell to poison a gift for her rival, the band rumbled and swirled upward ominously from the lowest registers of the basses. Medea is a splendid character and a great diva role (it was first sung by Isabella Colbran) in the line of conflicted sorceresses that goes back to Handel’s Alcina and others. She has committed numerous terrible crimes, including murder, to help her lover, Giasone, and is about to be exiled, since Giasone is going to marry Creusa, the princess of Corinth. Mayr’s depictions of her inner turmoil are the high points of the opera, from the duet in which she and Giasone confront this change in their circumstances, to her infernal invocation, to the aria in which rage and maternal instinct war as she contemplates the murder of her children.

Soprano Jennifer Rowley was spectacular in the title role: With her big, buttery soprano, hooded with careful vibrato or blazing with anger, she found the dramatic compass of this explosive character. The two supporting tenors (Derrek Stark forceful as Giasone, Mingjie Lei more lyric as Egeo, Giasone’s rival for Creusa) were effective, if not quite in her league; Teresa Castillo was a thin-sounding Creusa. As in “Tancredi,” the chorus, prepared by Derrick Goff, sang vigorously.

*Ms. Waleson writes about opera for the Journal.*

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