

## Rossini's *Ricciardo e Zoraide* and *Adina* from the 2018 Pesaro Festival

*Charles Jernigan, August 20, 2018.*

2018 is a Rossini anniversary year on several counts. It is the 150th anniversary of the composer's death in 1868, and that milestone is being celebrated all over Italy this year with numerous productions of his operas. It is also the 200th anniversary of the composition of three of his 39 operas--*Mosè in Egitto*, *Ricciardo e Zoraide* and *Adina*, and this year's Pesaro festival is dedicating two of its opera productions to two of those works.

### ***Ricciardo e Zoraide***

Between 1815 and 1823, Rossini focussed his operatic activity in Naples (with excursions to Rome, Venice and Milan to produce several other new works). The serious operas he created for Naples' San Carlo stage became the template for serious opera in Italy for some decades to come. The San Carlo was the most daring and professional house in Italy at the time, and Rossini was able to experiment and produce the ten serious works which came to be called the "jewels in his crown." It was an intensely creative period for him, presided over by his muse, lover and eventual wife, Isabella Colbran, who had the starring role in all of his Naples opera series. According to most critics and scholars over the years, the fifth of those ten Naples opera series, *Ricciardo e Zoraide*, was the least interesting and most conservative, and, in fact, its status is attested to by the paucity of modern revivals. Outside of two previous offerings at the ROF, modern productions have been very few indeed.

In some ways *Ricciardo e Zoraide* is similar to an opera semi-seria, and it is no chance that the music at times bears a close resemblance to *La gazza ladra*. No character is strictly comic, but a good production will take into account the unusual and difficult *tinta* of this work--a sort of musical and dramatic lightness, a tongue-in-cheekiness, which makes it unlike any other Rossini opera. The production which takes the story seriously and tries to make real people with modern psychological problems out of these fanciful caricatures will flounder on their unreality.

At Pesaro, the big, colorful, cartoonish production by Marshall Pynkoski hit it just right. At first glance, Pynkoski's production might seem like a (horror of horrors) traditional, even realistic production. But we soon see myriad little touches which let us know not to take it too seriously. Agorante's big, martial entrance aria might sound like Otello or Maometto, but when he preens in the mirror and smooths his hair into place, we know we are in the realm of parody or at least irony. Soon classical ballet dancers stream onto the stage (choreography by Jeannette Lajeunesse Zingg), and they interact around the singers, but not exactly with them, bringing a further level of unreality, as if *Swan Lake* had stumbled onto the wrong stage. The classic ballet dance style is right for Rossini's music, but one irony is that unlike some other Rossini operas, this one has no ballet; the dance is part of the parody. Zingg and Pynkoski founded Toronto's Opera Atelier and come from the world of classical and baroque ballet.

The sets (by Gerard Gauci) and costumes (by Michael Gianfrancesco) are beautiful and traditional--and like storybook pop-up pictures for *The Thousand and One Nights* or *Sinbad the Sailor*, or, as a friend said, like the sets for a Russian fairy-tale opera. And what about those sailor-dancers who accompany Ricciardo's arrival in an ornate, absurd little boat? Couldn't they have stepped out of *HMS Pinafore* with their candy striped shirts and blue knee breeches? And isn't Juan Diego Florez cute in his 'disguise'?--a little pirate outfit right out of "Pirates of the Caribbean." And what about Sergey

Romanovsky's Agorante costume, which might remind us old-timers of a parodistic version of Sam Ramey's Maometto in this same house 33 years ago, right down to the bare chest.

The over the top sets, the costumes, the dancers, and often the actions of the principals make all of this a bit unreal--and quite intentionally so. Pynkoski manages to satisfy us at times with the (temporary) tragic plight of these characters only to have their stylized, carefully choreographed movements belie the seriousness of it all; and after all, Rossini himself supplied the bright and happy vaudeville ending ("Or più dolci, intorno al core"), unlikely as it is. Even the defeated Agorante joins in ("Sciolta alfin da rie catene/Nuota l'alma nel piacer"--"Finally freed of its nasty chains/my heart swims in happiness")! Only Zomira refuses to join in the general merriment which pops up so unexpectedly at the end.

Pesaro brought an all-star cast to the undertaking. The dueling tenors were Sergey Romanovsky and the beloved Juan Diego Florez. Romanovsky's robust tenor had no trouble with the high notes--his is a big voice and I thought he was very good, and got better as the evening wore on; he sang in last year's *Le siège de Corinthe* (and I heard him also in Wexford's ill-conceived *Medea* last fall). Florez' more lyrical tenor as Ricciardo allowed him to add one more rare Rossini role to his long list. His voice may not have the astonishing bloom and freshness of his unexpected debut here as Corradino in *Matilde di Shabran* some 22 years ago, but he still has the high notes, the agility and his boyish good looks. A third young tenor, Xabier Anduaga sang the secondary role of Ernesto, Ricciardo's right-hand-man. He took his smallish duties with astonishing vigor and great ringing tones. If audience reaction was any indication, he will be assuming major Rossini roles soon. A particular happy surprise was Victoria Yarovaya as Zomira, a role debuted by the great Rosmunda Pisaroni. Rossini gives her only one aria, almost an "aria di sorbetto," "Più non sente quest'alma dolente," and Yarovaya brought down the house with it. She balanced the uneasy line between real anger (she is the spurned wife of Agorante) and comedy very well. The veteran Nicola Ulivieri sang the role of Ircano, poor fellow, since he does not even appear until well into Act II and doesn't get his own aria (he does get to lead off the Quartet "Contro cento, e cento prodi," one of the opera's best numbers).

The real Rossini star of the evening, however, was the Zoraide, Pretty Yende, who hails from South Africa. She is the sort of super-star I would come to hear again and again: her voice is big, flawless and beautiful, and she has incredible technique. Every demi-semi quaver was in place and her high notes, some unexpected, rang with perfect silvery clarity. The production provided a runway which came around in front of the orchestra, and all of the singers availed themselves of it to make the big auditorium in the Adriatic Arena seem smaller. When Yende came around and stood or sat only a foot or two from the first row, she was transfixing. She is the real thing, and provides the kind of visceral excitement that, say, Florez did early in his career.

The Chorus of the Teatro Ventidio Basso may be local, but they were very good; the Orchestra Sinfonica della RAI conducted by Giacomo Sagripanti was also excellent. One of the many innovations which Rossini used in *Ricciardo e Zoraide* was the (mostly offstage) stage band, which plays a march in the overture, first from far away and then closer and which leads into the opening chorus without a break. There are other offstage, "distant" instruments too, and an offstage chorus. Rossini experimented with spatial relationships in this opera, and sometimes the house orchestra answered the offstage effects. Sagripanti followed these requirements, and the effect was striking, just what Rossini would have wished.

This was one of the more memorable productions I have seen in Pesaro, from every point of view. *Ricciardo e Zoraide* is an opera which should be done more often--if you can find two of the best tenors in the world and a super star soprano.

## *Adina*



Oropesa and friends

*Adina* is in some ways Rossini's most mysterious opera. Written in 1818 (like *Ricciardo e Zoraide*) for an unknown commissioner, it did not go on stage until 1826, at the Sao Carlos Theater in Lisbon. Who commissioned it, and why? Why did Rossini, at the height of his fame, agree to write a one-act farsa, a form he had abandoned in 1813 with *Il signor Bruschino*? Why did he keep the original score with him for his whole life, a very unusual practice? Was he especially fond of it? Did he plan to reuse some of the music?

At any rate, this pleasing little bon-bon, which lasts about an hour and twenty minutes, is rarely done today, more rarely than any of the five farsas which Rossini wrote at the beginning of his career. Modern scholarship shows that only three of the nine numbers are new Rossini compositions, others being taken from the failed *Sigismondo* and some are in the hand of a very talented, but mysterious collaborator--another of the mysteries of this opera. So this opera is very much a pastiche.

Director Rosetta Cucchi takes the idea of the opera as a tasty morsel literally, and the set by Tiziano Santi is a giant, tiered, blue wedding cake, presided over by a myriad of extras--cooks, decorator, servants and even a live plasticized couple for the top of the cake. Some might think all the shtick a bit too much, but in the end you just have to laugh and go with the flow. The "star" of the show was Lisette Oropesa as Adina. Ms. Oropesa has had a big international career since emerging from the Metropolitan Opera's Lindemann Young Artist Development Program in 2008. She is a daring artist, singing everything from Rameau to Handel to Gluck's *Eurydice* in the French version of *Orphée et Eurydice* (which I saw recently in Los Angeles), along with standard roles. A versatile artist to be sure, but she has not sung a lot of Rossini, and though correct, her *Adina* seemed more studied than natural, especially in her entrance aria (by Rossini), "Fragolette fortunée" ("Fortunate wild strawberries"). She is a fine actress, however, and has a good sense of comic high-jenks. In the lower register, she has a lot of vibrato, but her tone becomes silvery in the upper reaches. She is also slim and attractive and I enjoyed her *Adina*. (She also gave a solo recital at the Festival, with orchestra. She excelled in the French numbers, especially "Robert, Robert, toi que j'aime" from *Robert le Diable*, which was stunning.)

Her Selimo was young South African tenor Levy Sekgapane. He has a lovely "tenore di grazia" voice, and acted well. I look forward to hearing more from him. Vito Priante was a knowing Caliph, the wise, fatherly kind as defined by Larry Wolff in his book *The Singing Turk*. Matteo Macchioni was a mincing Ali and Davide Giangregorio played Mustafà, the Gardiner. Diego Matheuz led the Orchestra Sinfonica G. Rossini and the men of the Coro del Teatro della Fortuna M. Agostini. Claudio Pernigotti

did the over-the-top costumes. It was all pretty farcical, like a Laurel and Hardy movie--a real bon-bon. Or piece of wedding cake. The audio track of the opera but, unfortunately, not the visuals is currently available on youtube - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Cg3oLXjrfh0>

Along with *Il barbiere di Siviglia* and the annual student performance of *Il viaggio a Reims* and a stunning concert by bass Nicola Alaimo of scenes and arias from various Rossini works, these operas and the Oropesa concert made for a great music-filled five days in Pesaro. There was time out for branzino in the Adriatic style, but not much time for sleep. I think it was the most satisfying Rossini Opera Festival I have been to in a long time. At least temporarily, the curse of badly directed operas seems to have lifted. Next year there will be a new *Semiramide* directed by Graham Vick (not my favorite), a new *L'equivoco stravagante* directed by the team of Patrice Caugier and Moshe Leisher, and a repeat of Davide Livermore's *Demetrio e Polibio*.