Summer Bel Canto in New York State

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Late summer in the Northeastern U.S. promised and delivered a bel canto bonanza: two rarely-heard Donizetti operas (*Le Convenienze Teatrali* and *Maria di Rohan*) and Bellini's *Norma*.

Lake George Opera's production of *Convenienze* (given under the title *Viva la Mamma*) took us to the idyllic town of Saratoga, famous for its mineral springs and venerable horse racing tradition. A haunt of the industrialists of the gilded age, the town is suspended in time. Many downtown buildings date to the 1870s and 80s, and residential areas are graced by resplendent "painted ladies" –Victorian mansions encrusted with gingerbread and painted brilliant colors. Yet sadly, I must report that this *Convenienze* scarcely lived up to the beautiful, historic setting! There was a precious little beauty and even less history in this travesty (literal and figurative) of a performance.

A sense of foreboding came over me during the pre-performance lecture, given by conductor Curtis Tucker. *Convenienze* lampoons the operas and opera companies of Donizetti's time. (In fact, he showed characteristic humility in sending-up his own recent occasion-piece *Elvida*). Nor was Rossini spared, for Mamm'Agata's aria in the second act is an amusingly distorted version - both poetically and musically - of the Willow-song in Rossini's *Otello*. The archetypes represented by the characters are still recognizable and amusing today. But neither Tucker nor the rather skimpy program notes gave the audience any historical context in which to place the jokes, musical or otherwise. Instead, whether through a lack of knowledge and preparation, or through pure cynicism, we were treated like recalcitrant children – nervously reassured for twenty minutes that the opera is funny and zany (after all, it features a drag queen!) and given no more than a bare synopsis of the plot.

A second red flag waved when Tucker revealed that a new scene had been expressly conceived and composed by John Douglas and Nelson Sheeley for this production. This would depict the auditions that took place before the opera as Donizetti conceived it begins. Several of the young singers would perform well-known arias (these included "Voi che sapate" and "Quando rapita in estasi") connected with 'Donizetti-style' recitatives -- these too would have lots of funny jokes in them, we were assured. Tucker never offered a convincing reason for why Donizetti's effervescent little score couldn't stand on its own feet, except that the production team wanted to 'make it longer'. Sure enough, the counterfeit recitatives resembled Donizetti's only superficially – they were plodding and clumsy by comparison, and the seam between the prosthetic audition scene and the first notes of Donizetti's actual score was anything but cosmetically satisfying.

The next nail in the coffin was an auditorium acoustically unsuitable for opera. The company's PR strategy for dealing with this fatal flaw was to have Tucker put an animated, positive spin on their unique "sky-pit" – an elevated platform suspended over

and behind the stage onto which the orchestra was crammed. The orchestra was *behind* and *above* the singers, with the conductor's back to the audience (the singers were able to see him on television screens suspended on the walls of the auditorium). Isn't that cool and unique? Well, not really. The inverted relationship between vocalists and orchestra together with the shape of the auditorium conspired to create a muddy acoustic where the singers often found themselves overwhelmed.

But acoustics can't be fingered for all, or even most, of what made this performance such a trial to attend. The quality of the singing ranged from adequate to very poor, and every faux-pas in the vocal compendium was on display: poor breath support, muddy articulation of coloratura passages, abysmal Italian diction, and faulty intonation. Bass-baritone Kenneth Mattice as Procolo and tenor John Tsotsoros fared better than their peers; and Jennifer Roderer as the Musico showed promise, with a plummy, attractive mezzo-soprano voice that made me wonder what she might be capable of in a part that gave her more to do. But Elizabeth Andrews Roberts was woefully overparted as the prima donna, completely unequal to the demands of the taxing cavatina. Bafflingly, the most miscast role was the titular Mamm'Agata: Richard Holmes's grainy, poorly-supported voice was inaudible most of the time. That he was cast in the crucial lead role-the lynchpin of the entire opera - to the exclusion of the much more capable Mattice, is most perplexing. The most charitable explanation is that he was indisposed, but no announcement was made prior to the performance.

Only in the ensemble numbers, where individual singers' defects were less apparent, did the gloriousness of this scintillating score manage to shine through. This was particularly true in the big octet at the beginning of Act I, but even then, the relative balance of voices was wrong, with the principal tenor and soprano (whose lines are supposed to soar over the ensemble while the other voices provide counterpoint) virtually inaudible.

To be fair to these young singers, the director made their task doubly (and unnecessarily) difficult not only through poor casting, but by demanding frantic, incessant, complex, and mostly pointless stage action. This was slapstick of the most vulgar order: breast-groping for no reason at all, and all manner of non-stop, unfunny hijinks that distracted unnecessarily from Donizetti's clever score but couldn't patch up the other glaring problems.

The scenic and costume design was by far the best part of the production. The sets represented the rear of a folded drop-scene with a few tables and chairs for the first part, and a primitive platform for the performance of *Romulo ed Ersilda.* Modern-dress costumes of vaguely 1950's style were used for the rehearsal, and intentionally ridiculous Roman garb for *Romulo ed Ersilda.* The Prima Donna looked like June Cleaver in a beautiful A-line, while Mamm'Agata sported a delicious blue monstrosity of a dress with a huge red coiffure and a leopardskin coat.

The entire production was symptomatic of many troubling trends in present-day opera production. The audience was cynically assumed to be unable to sit still for any lyrical

moments at all, too dull to grasp humor of any subtlety, and too unsophisticated about voices to realize that the cast can't sing the music on the page. And the production team unfortunately had swallowed hook, line, and sinker the misguided and all too common notion that the composer and librettist can't be trusted.

It was therefore with a collective sigh of relief that we waved good-bye to Saratoga, and journeyed south to Katonah for the Caramoor Festival, where the second performance of their second performance of *Norma*, conducted by Will Crutchfield, promised much better things. Caramoor has become a necessary part of my summers, and the wrongs of the Lake George experience was more than righted in this one. Caramoor is unique: set in a bucolic forest, a complex of Spanish villas and outbuildings, fountains, lush green picnic spaces, and gardens, the opera (or concert) one attends is only a part of a larger experience. The operas are preceded by lectures and concerts by the young artists engaged by the festival.

This time, Andrew Porter gave an engaging lecture focusing on the singers of the past (Grisi in particular) who had sung the role of the hapless druidess, outlining the vocal challenges that make the part so fearsome – and so attractive – to sopranos. A fascinating and informative recital of Wagnerian music followed, intended to illustrate how Bellini's music had influenced the younger composers'.

Caramoor's Norma, Angela Meade, has been on my radar screen for some years now. It's a voice that is difficult not to like, but in the past I feared that she was being set on path to vocal perdition by management and agents forcing her into big dramatic roles for which she lacked the requisite vocal maturity. I certainly thought so when I heard her in *Ernani* at the Met, and at last year's *Semiramide* at Caramoor. I therefore approached this *Norma* with more than a small dose of skepticism, despite the considerable buzz on the street that she'd knocked the ball out of the park.

And indeed, it seems something magical had happened between last year and this. For once in this age of vocal 'stars' manufactured by slick PR rather than actual talent and technique, the reality has actually surpassed the hype. Not only could Meade sing the notes, but she was utterly convincing. The old tentativeness, the inability to cleanly cut through a big ensemble, and a host of other problems she had before seemed to have vanished. In the embryonic diva's place was an utterly new, fully-formed one – the same remarkable instrument, but utilized with a new confidence and control. She owned the evening. Articulation was flawless, even in the most difficult passages, trills were clean; pianissimi seemed to emerge from nowhere yet surrounded the hearer. There was great dramatic power in the chest voice, and a soaring line that cut through even the big choruses like butter. She was utterly captivating in the "Casta Diva", fearsome in the Act I trio and in the duet "In mia man alfin tu sei", heartrending in the finale ultimo. This singer has definitely arrived, and I only wish I could see her at Wexford in Mercadante's *Virginia*.

The evening would have been worthwhile even if none of the other performances were standout, but everyone else acquitted themselves beautifully. Soprano Keri Alkema as Adalgisa matched Meade's coloratura technique ornament for ornament. Her voice was darker than Meade's, a nice contrast in their duets, and her dramatic commitment was similarly complete. "Sgombra e la sacra selva" included rather fatuous ornamentation, which served not to enhance the aria, but to obscure the melodic line.

Kudos, too, are due to Emmanuel di Villarosa as Pollione who sang the role even though indisposed. The voice was a bit raw, the vocal line somewhat altered to avoid some of the higher passages. But the basic timbre of the voice was quite attractive, and by the time of the final scenes, he had warmed up. Dramatically he was quite convincing, especially in the *finale ultimo*, an accomplishment given the improbability of Pollione's change of heart.

The Oroveso was Caramoor's stalwart bass Daniel Mobbs, who seemed a bit worn the last couple of times I heard him, but here had returned to his former sonorous self. His participation in the final ensemble – when he relents and agrees to care for Norma's children – was especially moving.

Caramoor's next offering, *Maria di Rohan* was almost as good as their *Norma*, but (and I'll probably be roasted for saying this) *Maria* is in my opinion a stronger opera. Given on July 24 (a brutally sweltering evening), this was unfortunately a one-time-only performance. We were nervous, as the announced Maria, Takesha Kizart, was indisposed due to allergies and would not be able to appear. In her place, cover Jennifer Rowley had been called up to serve at very short notice. We'd heard Miss Rowley the week before in the pre-opera concert of young artists. While impressive, Rowley's performance there hadn't given us a clear idea how well she would fare singing an entire opera (and a demanding one at that).

The pre-concert fare was especially rich. At 3, we enjoyed a brief panel discussion with Philip Gossett and Will Crutchfield, in which they discussed some of the particularly interesting features of *Maria di Rohan*. At 4:15, we enjoyed a concert of the alternative music from *Maria* which we wouldn't be hearing at the main performance, then at 5pm a concert of Donizetti's vocal music written while in Vienna. This included songs as well as a complete performance of the *Miserere* in G minor. Finally, Gossett gave a characteristically informative and animated lecture at 7pm on the opera itself, giving special attention to its influence on Verdi, which is especially evident in *Ballo*.

At the risk of being sidetracked, I want to acknowledge an exceptional young tenor who participated in both the *Norma* and *Maria di Rohan* pre-performance concerts. Brian Landry is the real thing - a tenor with a big, and I mean HUGE voice, one with beauty, heft, an Italianate squillo, solid technique, marvellous diction, and real emotional involvement in the material he's singing. He blew us away in all that he sang - which included a duet from *Die Walkure* in the pre-*Norma* concert, and major solo parts in the Donizetti's *Miserere*. This is decidedly not the kind of uninvolved, milquetoast singing

that has become *de rigeur* at many regional American opera companies. Landry's technical foundation is solid, so this voice that sounds born to sing heavily orchestrated, hefty tenor roles such as Wagner, Puccini, and late Verdi, was equally comfortable in bel canto, for he showed no strain in handling ornamented passages at all. The audience rewarded this gifted singer's hard work and dedication with vociferous applause. Even with the almost uniformly high quality of the rest of the young artists in the program, Landry stood head and shoulders above the rest. He was the cover for de Villarosa in Norma, and had he actually called upon, it might have been an even more remarkable performance than it was. But I feel confident in saying that Landry's day will come.

As to the main event - *Maria di Rohan* - as with the previous week's *Norma*, we were treated to an electric performance. The intrepid cover, Jennifer Rowley, crowned herself with laurels. Her performance was simply stunning, doubly so given the limited rehearsal time she's rumored to have had. She has a gleaming, bright tone, an attractive vibrato (reminiscent of Opera Rara's early diva Janet Price); it's a voice with a lot of color, dark at the bottom, bright and gleaming at the top. Her coloratura, while not always perfectly articulated (there was a rather blurred downward run) was quite good, and she has a very nice trill. Her dramatic ability was absolutely stellar - she made the heroine's plight completely believable without overacting.

The role of Chalais was sung by Luciano Bothelo, a young Brazilian tenor who - to judge by this performance - has a very bright future ahead of him. The audience was as smitten as Maria from the moment he strode onto the stage to deliver his first aria. Botelho has a bright, clarion lyric tenor voice; a bit on the small side, but agile and under complete control - I couldn't resist fantasizing his re-creating some of the forgotten Rubini roles. His technique is simply terrific, his approach to singing restrained yet passionate. This is a tenor who doesn't need to belt every note - and Botelho has them up to a d-flat. However, when he partnered with Scott Bearden's enormous baritone, the voice was clear and bright enough to hold its own.

Bearden's Chevreuse was uneven vocally but very exciting. It took him some time to warm up -his aria di sortita was delivered in a rather uninvolved way, and there were some raw, rather hoarse notes - particularly in the top of the voice. However, by the midpoint of the opera he had come into his own, and his delivery of the scene in which Chevreuse learns of Maria's betrayal was spine-tingling. Chevreuse's loss became heartrending, his anger terrible. The lady seated next to me (a complete stranger, and as I later discovered, a member of Caramoor's fundraising committee!) was clutching my arm throughout the last 20 minutes of the opera!

For both this and the *Norma*, conductor Will Crutchfield led exemplary performances. His tempi were beautifully chosen, he was sensitive to dynamics, and unafraid of savoring the longer, more languid melodic lines, but was also willing to crack the whip in the harder-hitting passages. He gets better and better with each passing year, it seems. The audience, chorus and orchestra are to be commended for braving the soupy heat and humidity - most audience members were fanning themselves in time to the music!