Semiramide Comes Home

Charles Jernigan, October 2018

(Charles saw the final performance on October 27)

Rossini's final opera written for Italy had its world premiere at Venice's La Fenice Opera House on Feb. 3, 1823, starring the composer's new wife, Isabella Colbran as the Babylonian queen. Now, on the 150th anniversary of the composer's death La Fenice has once again mounted the monumental work in a production and with a cast fully worthy of the composer considered by many to be Italy's greatest.

Semiramis is a legendary figure of female super-hero status—child of deities, the wife of a general, a deviser of military strategy, leader of armies, wife of King Ninus, matricide and incestuous lover. Voltaire was one of many authors to use her for a literary work, a tragedy, and that was the immediate basis for Gaetano Rossi's libretto for Rossini. Before the opera begins, Semiramide has conspired with Assur (bass) to murder her husband, King Nino; her young son has been sent away to be raised by one of her husband's generals. Now the son, Arsace (mezzo soprano), has grown to manhood and become leader of the Babylonian armies, and Semiramide, not knowing that he is her son, has fallen in love with him. He, however, wants to marry the Princess Azema, and so do Assur and Idreno (tenor), an Indian prince. When Semiramide announces that she will marry Arsace, all hell breaks loose, and Nino's ghost makes an appearance. In the second act, the mother-son relationship is revealed and Arsace, searching for Assur in the dark, manages to stab and kill his own mother instead, fulfilling the vengeance demanded by Nino's ghost. Arsace is hailed as the new king.



Semiramide and Chorus Photograph ©Michele Crosera

The astute reader will see that Voltaire/Rossi crossed elements of the Semiramis legend with elements from Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, but Rossi also added his own elements, such as the Idreno-Azema relationship (which gives the tenor a chance to sing two arias) and a spectacular mad scene for Assur, before he recovers himself enough to go to his doom.

Rossini's score begins with one of his most famous overtures and proceeds through formal arias and ensembles which set the pattern for serious Italian opera through *Aida,* and which caps, as has often been said, the long tradition of baroque opera. Thus it stands, monumentally, at the end and at the beginning of eras in operatic history.

The conductor of the Fenice production, Riccardo Frizza, certainly appreciated the importance of this opera's structure, for he did it complete, all four hours of music. He understood the way Rossini builds tension and then relieves it and then builds again—the tension through the duets and big concerted ensembles, and the relief through some of the arias, like Semiramide's famous "Bel raggio lusinghier" or Idreno's two tenor arias. Almost every production I have ever seen cut one of the tenor arias, some of the cabaletta repeats and many lines of recitative. Not this one: we had every repeat, both tenor arias and all the lines of recitative, even for minor characters like Azema and Mitrane.

The Fenice also gave us a spectacular cast, able to project remarkable ease with one of the most difficult opera scores ever written. We had every thirty-second and hemidemisemi-quaver (64th note), every high note, and low note. The basses (Assur and the High Priest Oroe) were as proficient in flexible coloratura as were the ladies and the tenor. Their excellence made the 4 hours and 35 minutes (with interval) fly by; I could have sat in the cramped seats of Venice's gorgeous, rebuilt baroque opera house another four and half hours in order to listen to such spectacular music so wonderfully performed.

In 1823 Isabella Colbran (Semiramide) was in vocal decline, and Rossini did not give her as florid music as she had sung in his Naples operas a few years earlier, but he gave her one of his most famous and beautiful arias with chorus, "Bel raggio" to make up for or perhaps disguise her loss of fluency. In our production, the Colbran role was sung by Jessica Pratt, the British-born Australian who may be the inheritor of Joan Sutherland in this repertory. Pratt was flawless. She had several duets—with Arsace and Assur—and was in many ensembles, and her voice blending with the other voices was divine.



Idreno, Assur, Semiramide Photograph ©Michele Crosera

The mezzo (Arsace) was the young Teresa Iervolino, an Italian singer from Ragusa, who was very exciting to hear in her two big arias and in all the duets. She has the astounding coloratura that the title role lacks, and Iervolino delivered in spades, but she also has a voice of extreme beauty and richness; it was a pleasure sometimes just to close one's eyes and listen. Another young Italian, Enea Scala, was as superb an Idreno as one is likely to hear, with ringing, powerful high notes and great flexibility. His voice has a baritonal quality with a remarkable upper extension, rather like Michael Spyres, and I was delighted that Frizza included his oft-cut second aria, "La speranza più soave." Assur is a crucial role in this opera, and Rossini does not let him off easily; Alex Esposito conquered the challenges. When the opera is done uncut, Oroe also has an important role, and bass Simon Lim gave him the proper dignity and weight. Even the minor roles of Mitrane (Enrico Iviglia) and Nino's Ghost (Francesco Milanese) were solid, serious voices.



Semiramide and Arsace Photograph ©Michele Crosera

Stage Director Cecilia Ligorio did not opt for ugly *regietheater* (like the 2003 spaceship production in Pesaro) or updating to contemporary times with commentary on dictatorships, like the recent David Alden production in Munich, or an appeal to questionable historicity, like the Met's production. Instead, she chose an archetypal approach, where the setting is timeless, stark and clean. Sets (by Nicolas Bovey) and costumes (by Marco Piemontese) tended towards the classical with the dominating colors of gold, white and black. Idreno (an Indian prince) had a more colorful magenta costume. One of Semiramide's costumes was perhaps modeled on a famous portrait of Giuditta Pasta in the role (but with much restraint). The somewhat abstract scenes gave us a sense of the places in the libretto (the temple of Baal, the hanging gardens, Ninus' tomb) without being literal. It all reminded me of the work of Italy's dean of stage design and direction, Pier Luigi Pizzi.

Dancers augmented the staging. Five women in striking costumes with black, flowing pants and mesh, see-through tops acted as priestesses of Baal, and young men in white flowing pants and nude chests were priests. Their tastefully choreographed movement (by Daisy Ransom Phillips) helped to relieve the sometimes static nature of the action. Director Ligorio stated that she viewed the characters as archetypes rather than treat them psychologically. However, it seemed to me that Semiramide herself was a more complex character than is sometimes seen. She was seen in sexual proximity to the handsome male "priests" of Baal, as if she enjoyed a good orgy. Her interaction with Arsace was overtly sexual to the point of placing his hands on her breasts. It reminded me of Dante's description of Semiramide, when she appears among the lustful in Canto V of the *Inferno*: "She was empress over many lands,/so corrupted by lust was she that she licensed lust in her laws, that she might not be blamed for the way she lived." Making Semiramis so sexual (in addition to being a murderess!) makes the great recognition in Act II (that Arsace is her son) truly the "Giorno di orror! E di contento!" ("Day of horror…and of joy") of which their duet sings. Alex Esposito as Assur was also a very fine actor, moving from the arrogant villain of Act I, to the man beset by ghosts and madness in Act II.

I have seen many *Semiramide*s in a long life of opera going, starting with Sutherland/Horne/ Bonynge in the late 1960"s. No matter how fine the protagonists might be, there was always something wrong in this opera which is so difficult to cast and direct—a weak tenor or bass or a boring production, or one that rips the story so far from Rossi, Rossini and Voltaire, that all sense of tragedy is lost. None of that was true of this Venice production, which I saw on Oct. 27, the last performance of the run. It was truly all together, including fine work from the orchestra and chorus. With this *Semiramide* the opera came home to La Fenice. Rossini, *dal suo stellato soglio*, would be proud.



Chorus of priests and priestesses Photograph ©Michele Crosera