Donizetti's *La file du regiment* at Opera Colorado

Charles Jernigan, November, 2024

Opera Colorado, Denver Colorado's opera company, offered Donizetti's *La file du règiment* for the first time in its history on November 9-17, 2024, and it was a triumph in almost every way, providing a salutary antidote to all the recent depressing news coming from so many quarters.

As opposed to the real wars on television every night, the 21st Regiment's Tyrolean war is a jolly one indeed. Marie, boyfriend Tonio and her "fathers" have proved to be some of Donizetti's most popular and delightful characters, particularly in our times, when *La fille* has been championed by a series of wonderful prima donnas and tenors beginning with Joan Sutherland, Luciano Pavarotti and Beverly Sills in the 1960s and 70s and extending to current stars like Juan Diego Florez, Javier Camarena, Natalie Dessay and Lisette Oropesa.

Opera Colorado's production, with Alpine sets and brightly colored costumes borrowed from Arizona Opera, was one of the funniest, best directed (by Chía Patiño) and well executed ones in this Donizetti fan's memory. The production was traditional in the sense that Boyd Ostroff's set clearly placed the action in an Alpine setting and Kathleen Trott's costumes dated it to around the time of composition, 1840. Physically, the production was very lively and well-choreographed. Marie, played by Katrina Galka, darted around the stage, jumped on every conceivable table, chair and bench, and generally acted splendidly as a slightly gawky, not-quite-adult girl, in love for the first time. This Marie was a little less tomboy than some recent Maries (e.g. Natalie Dessay), but she was still the rebel vivandière we all love. Her voice was up to the lively marches and sentimental ballads too, and she properly introduced impressive variations to repeated passages.



Tonio was Andrew Stenson, whose busy career in recent years has included some major European festivals; I saw him in Jacopo Foroni's *Margherita* in Wexford a few years

ago. Then as now he was charming and his Tonio was almost as vigorous as Galka's Marie. He was particularly excellent in the gorgeous, sentimental aria "Pour me rapprocher de Marie"; he was playful in the Act I duet with her; and in the all-important post-doctoral PhD exam for all tenors worth their salt, "O mes amis," he passed easily. If his high C's lacked the ping that the greatest tenors bring to the aria, he got through them admirably, but you could tell that it wasn't easy.

Septuagenarian (!!) Peter Strummer as Sulpice was certainly the oldest singer I have ever seen in the role, or maybe in any major role on the opera stage. He's certainly a pro, but maybe he should have retired from the 21st Regiment some years ago. Obviously, he couldn't keep up with the youngsters physically and sometimes he was barely audible, but he knows his stuff, and the audience loved him. Thoughtfully, Donizetti didn't compose an aria for the role. On the other hand, Catherine Clark was hilarious as the Marquise of Birkenfield: she mugged with the best of them and her singing was excellent too. A lot of folks in the audience seemed not to have read the synopsis because there was a loud, audible gasp when the Marquise announced she was really Marie's mother, bringing an unplanned (?) laugh from Clark.

Ari Pelto conducted the Opera Colorado Chorus and Orchestra in a lively fashion. Sahar Nouri was Chorus Master, and the chorus performed excellently, participating in the stage action with verve and precision. During the catchy overture, there was mimed action, giving the background--the soldiers discovery of the infant Marie and her growth as their "daughter." Because the dumb show was funny and well directed like the rest of this production, it worked. Joe Beumer, the Lighting Designer is to be credited with making the overture dumb show—as well as the rest—a resounding success.

The speaking role of the Duchess of Krakenthorpe is often played as a cameo for a celebrity or a retired singer—Kiri Te Kanawa and Montserrat Caballe are among the retired opera singers who have done the turn, and several stage actresses and even the late US Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg have assumed the role. On this instance, Opera Colorado featured a popular drag queen, Monét X Change, who has won prizes on "Ru Paul's Drag Race," a drag queen competition television show, wildly popular in the US and other countries including Great Britain. X Change, whose real name is Kevin Akeem Bertin, is unusual in the drag universe in that she is a trained opera singer. For her, Opera Colorado added an aria to the speaking role, which turned out to be "La vendetta," Dr. Bartolo's aria from *Le nozze di Figaro.* The Drag Duchess sang it in Act 2 right after the Marquise of Birkenfield announces that Marie may marry Tonio instead of the Duchess' son. The sentiment of "vengeance" from the Mozart aria was apt even if the Mozart's style did not exactly accord with Donizetti's sound field. X Change acquitted herself reasonably well with a strong bass voice, and in the physical action her elaborate head dress was knocked off. Never mind. Monét got to wear the best costume in the production (especially created by Minnesota Opera for their production of the work). The audience loved it.

Spoken dialogue was in English translation with the musical numbers sung in French, and it worked for the many first-timers in the audience, including two women next to us who had brought a teenage son. They laughed at all the jokes and enjoyed the singing. Others were shocked to discover that there were no face microphones—and no amplification. And of course there were the fans of Monét X Change. If this production failed to charm those folks into coming to an opera again, at least they seem to have had a good time, so what can we say? Well, "Salut à la France" (and to Donizetti).