

Toronto.

Print

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Date: Jan 1, 2007

Words: 3114

Publication: Opera Canada

ISSN: 0030-3577

If it can be said that Opera Atelier has a calling card, it would have to be *Die Zauberflöte*, reportedly North America's first period-style production of Mozart's opera and the vehicle for its arrival 15 years ago on the stage of what has since become the company's regular Toronto home, the ornately elegant Elgin Theatre.

This season's November revival preserved the stylized movement vocabulary with which director Marshall Pynkoski and choreographer Jeannette Zingg originally challenged our notions of how the opera should look, a challenge even more dramatic than such latter-day innovators as Maurice Sendak and Julie Taymor. If set designer Gerard Gauci and costume designer Dora Rust-D'Eye dressed the action with 18th-century eyes, Pynkoski and Zingg made the opera move in a style almost more manneristically Baroque than neo-classical.

It took Penelope Randall-Davis time to find her vocal feet as Queen of the Night, and Curtis Sullivan's was a rather light-voiced Sarastro. As is often the case in Opera Atelier productions, visual criteria seemed to matter at least as much as vocal, in order to emphasize the youthful vitality that apparently characterized the opera's first production in Vienna. With Colin Ainsworth as Tamino, Peggy Kriha Dye as Pamina, Olivier Laquerre as a remarkably engaging Papageno, Carla Huhtanen as Papagena and Jennie Such, Vilma Indra Vitols and Laura Pudwell as the Three Ladies, that vitality was very much in evidence, although Gerald Isaac's over-the-top Monostatos continued to invite sedation. David Fallis presided ably over the period-instrument-playing Tafelmusik Orchestra.--William Littler

Puccini's *La rondine* is probably the composer's least-performed mature work, but on Oct. 1, the Opera in Concert cast and chorus, under music director Jose Hernandez and chorus master Robert Cooper, gave such a vibrant reading of the score that it reminded the audience of just how good the opera is. While the promised OinC surtitles did not materialize for this opera, the cast was so expressive that they carried the story as if in a silent movie.

Talented soprano Arlene Alvarado (Magda) once again displayed her rich, smoky, nuanced voice. She is a charismatic singer with a gorgeous legato line that is liquid pearls, although one wishes she would hold her end notes longer. Kurt Lehmann (Ruggero) is proving to be one of Canada's most dependable tenors. He has the money notes and a clear, clean, romantic delivery. He has always been an emotional singer, and as his voice darkens and deepens, he tells stories in his music.

The find of the opera was soprano Lydia Skorides (Lisette), a lyric soprano of wonderful dimensions and a natural actress. She was so assured that she took one's breath away with her portrayal. Her distinctive voice also commands attention because it is sweet, strong and arching, all at the same time. Also of note is young bass Vasil Garvanliev (Rambaldo), whose

voice hints of richness and depth to come. Tenor Rory McGlynn (Prunier) had the poet's patter down pat, but showed a bit of a pinched top. When his voice opens up, he, too, will be a talent to watch.

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A flock of young singers from the chorus made up the rest of the large cast. The performer who caught my attention was light lyric soprano Anna Bateman (Bianca/Gabriella/Offstage Voice). She has a very fresh and pretty sound indeed.

Hernandez was the perfect choice for this opera because he was able to affect the dialogue and chatter in the singing while allowing the set pieces to come to glorious fulfillment.--Paula Citron

Opera in Concert was rewarded with a sold-out house Nov. 19 for its risky performance of Poulenc's *Dialogues des Carmelites*, the buzz generated largely by the star power of Isabel Bayrakdarian in the role of Blanche de la Force. For Bayrakdarian, this was a now-rare local outing in opera, and a nice opportunity to work the role in advance of her appearance in Lyric Opera of Chicago's remount of the Robert Carsen/Michael Levine production in Feb./Mar. The risk for OinC, of course, lay in mounting a concert staging with a piano reduction of a work that relies greatly on orchestral and vocal coloring in tandem to achieve its dramatic effects and contrasts. Alison d'Amato, currently Visiting Assistant Professor of Music at the University of Buffalo, served as Music Director for OinC, and as pianist gave an intense performance of the difficult score. But while piano reductions often provide insights into musical structure, this one sounded rather sketchy, and in the end rather dull.

Bayrakdarian did not disappoint. Even in concert, she projected a vivid character, using facial expression and fidgeting fingers to express Blanche's fragility and nervousness. Her voice in radiant bloom, she also brought an emotional depth to the performance that showcased her remarkable artistry--and, it must be said, set her apart. But this is almost by definition an ensemble piece, and Bayrakdarian had committed support from mezzos Lynne McMurtry (Madame de Croissy) and Ashley Becker (Madame Lidoine), soprano Deanna Hendriks (Sister Constance), baritone Bryan Estabrooks (Marquis de la Force) and tenor Stephen Ericson (Chevalier de la Force). Robert Cooper again led the OinC Chorus. Even if it seemed at times that the piece would have benefited from more rehearsal, it was theatrically and musically engaging right up to that remarkable ending (no less devastating here than with full orchestral forces). This production was the first for which OinC has used surtitles, a welcome and useful innovation, since the company generally presents unfamiliar repertoire. Now, if only it would liberate its male soloists and choristers from dreary, anti-theatrical, black-tie uniform.--Wayne Gooding

In addition to their appearances in main stage Canadian Opera Company productions, the members of the company's Ensemble Studio have traditionally been given an annual showcase in the brick-walled Imperial Oil Opera Theatre of Toronto's Tanenbaum Opera Centre, this season in the form of early December's off-beat, comedic double bill pairing William Walton's Chekhov-inspired *The Bear* with the world premiere of James Rolfe's *Swoon*.

Rolfe commanded immediate attention as a talent to watch back in 1999 with the Queen of Puddings Music Theatre premiere of *Beatrice Chancey* (by no means incidentally, a launch vehicle for the operatic career of Measha Bruggersgosman) and the Toronto composer reinforced the favorable impression of that impressive calling card with his new 45-minute,

two-couple comic turn on the theme of jealousy. Set to a text by Anna Chatterton that is full of clever turns of phrase pertinent to the battle of the sexes, Swoon found Rolfe once again producing singable vocal lines in a mostly tonal style, economically accompanied by a chamber orchestra in such a way that the words were supported rather than covered.

With Derek Bate conducting, Michael Patrick Albano directing and an efficient apartment setting by Victoria Wallace framing the action, the cast on opening night--Melinda Delorme and Justin Welsh as the affluent couple and Virginia Hatfield and Lawrence Wiliford as their proletarian counterparts--rose admirably to the challenge of four meaty roles.

There were three such roles in Walton's *The Bear*, although Lauren Segal as the young widow, Popova, Jon-Paul Decosse as her rough-hewn, amorous neighbor, Smirnov, and Andrew Stewart as her servant, Luka, seemed to find it just as difficult to draw much humor from this slight Chekhovian tale (under Ashlie Corcoran's minimal direction) as the orchestra did in finding much wit in Walton's otherwise well-crafted score, under Stephen Philcox's similarly unassertive musical direction.--William Little

It's wonderful to experience young people throwing themselves into music with the single-minded enthusiasm the Canadian Children's Opera Chorus brought to its festive remount (with some new material) of *A Dickens of a Christmas*. With tuneful music by Errol Gay and a breezy libretto by Michael Patrick Albano, the piece retells Dickens' *A Christmas Carol* in just over one hour, but pretty well captures every major character and story development in the process. Albano also served as director, using the multi-levels of Toronto's Harbourfront Centre Theatre to excellent effect as holding areas for the chorus, which at times is part of the action and at times commenting on it. The CCOC is actually a number of choruses (each broadly tailored for different ages and levels of experience), so in full ensemble, there were sometimes almost 100 voices on the stage. It's all a bit unwieldy, perhaps, but with baritone Mark Pedrotti (Scrooge) and tenor Ryan Harper (Marley/Bob Cratchit) as professional anchors, the young soloists and choirs (responsibilities were split between the performances) provided a joyous experience to an audience of all ages. CCOC Artistic Director Ann Cooper Gay conducted the small ensemble of instrumentalists (the colorful score encompasses strings, woodwinds, horn and piano) with a deft hand (it became an effectively disciplined one for the large-scale vocal pieces). It all came over with a delicious sense of fun, both in the piece itself and in the work of the young performers, who seemed to delight in making music. Just as this opera was being performed in early December, the Centrediscs label released an earlier CCOC opera project on CD, Harry Somers' *A Midwinter Night's Dream*. The late Ruby Mercer, founder of the CCOC and this magazine, would have been very proud.--Wayne Gooding

Toronto Masque Theatre really came into its own with its production of a *Venus and Adonis* double bill (Nov. 10). The first half of the program was a dramatized reading of Shakespeare's poem, set to music by Thomas Morley (for violin, recorders and lute). The intermission was followed by TMT's first-ever completely staged opera, John Blow's *Venus and Adonis* masque from 1685. The excellent, eight-player, early-music ensemble, led by violinist and TMT Artistic Director Larry Beckwith, included some of the top Baroque musicians in town.

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If TMT's mandate is to bring music, dance and spectacle together, Blow's *Venus and Adonis* was a triumph. The anonymous libretto Blow worked with was a much more benign treatment of the myth than Shakespeare's dark spin on the story, and this production radiated a gentle

charm under director Derek Boyes. The versatile Marie-Nathalie Lacoursiere not only danced and sang, she also played the recorder and designed the costumes. Both Boyes and Lacoursiere are Associate Directors of the company, and their considerable skills were very fruitful additions to the production.

The backdrop was adorable. I don't know how Montreal visual artist Caroline Guibault managed it, but there was a projected curtain that went up and down at the beginning and end of each scene to reveal suitably drawn landscapes. The artist's style is whimsical, which worked very well with the pretty score.

Soprano Rachael Harwood-Jones (Venus) is headed for a sterling career. She is a beautiful young woman with a gorgeous, lilting, expressive voice that also has substance layered over delicacy. Bass Andrew Mahon (Adonis) is an attractive singer, but his pitch was wild at times. But he looked the part and displayed suitable charisma. Soprano Michele DeBoer possesses a clear, limpid voice and her Cupid rang sweet and true. The chorus of shepherd and shepherdesses (Daniel Cabena, Stephen Erickson, Jesse Clark, Carrie Wiebe and Lacoursiere) sounded very good as an ensemble, but showed weaker voices when in solo roles. My one complaint is that diction was deplorable on the part of most of the singers. The good news, however, is that the Winchester Street Theatre, which was built for dance performances, was a wonderful venue for TMT. Perhaps it has found a home at last.--Paula Citron

The University of Toronto Faculty of Music possesses a staff that knows the theatre game and can seemingly produce snappy productions at will. Such was the case with Johann Strauss's beloved operetta *Die Fledermaus* (Nov. 11). Fred Perruzza, by trolling through his archival storage of sets, was able to cobble together a production that looked very good. The Eisenstein house was all draperies and antique chairs, while Prince Orlofsky's palace was outdoor furniture and shrubbery placed on a revolving stage. Lisa Magill's period costumes were quite attractive.

Director Michael Patrick Albano did the English adaptation and had the story told through Orlofsky's narration, which did tend to run on. Why he couldn't trust the plot to stand on its own (after the back story of the bat-costume debacle is told) is anyone's guess. His staging, nonetheless, was crisp and to the point, if obvious. Conductor Sandra Horst led the exuberant players of the U of T orchestra in an almost-but-not-quite reading of the score, replete with squeaky woodwinds. However, what they lacked in skill, they made up in enthusiasm. Choreographer Allison Grant managed to find a few men who could dance a czardas to add zest to Rosalinde's Hungarian homage in "Klange der Heimat."

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The singers were up to the demands of the roles and some displayed considerable talent indeed. Happily, diction had been worked on and the lyrics were fairly audible. Michael Barrett (von Eisenstein) displayed a commanding and clear tenor voice of promise, while Adam Luther (Alfred) could make the money notes and affect an Italianate sob that gave his opera-singer character verisimilitude. Both are talents to watch. Soprano Ileana Mantalbeti (Rosalinde) has a huge voice, but has to be careful about pitch. Soprano Eve-Lyn de la Haye (Adele) was able to execute her character's pretty coloratura runs with ease. Heather Jewson showed a deep, rich mezzo-soprano as Orlofsky, while Benjamin Covey's sonorous baritone gave Dr. Falke a rich sound. Bass-baritone Stephen Hegedus (Frank) has a vibrato that pervades his voice, and baritone Jeffrey Newberry (Dr. Blind) is a very pleasant sound in the

making.--Paula Citron

Toronto Operetta Theatre pulled off a genuinely hilarious production of Gilbert & Sullivan's *Patience* (Nov. 11). Director/choreographer Anne Allan brought a real freshness to the staging and dancing, while kudos goes to conductor Derek Bate, who led the small ensemble in a lively and tasteful manner. His women's chorus was gorgeous.

This production was Allan's debut with TOT, and one hopes she will return. She is Artistic Director of the Charlottetown Festival and her credits embrace a host of musical-theatre productions. There was a professional flair to *Patience* that was immediately noticeable, particularly the effective use of the chorus. Allan began her career as a ballet dancer, so her understanding of choreography is sound. Never has a TOT chorus been put through its paces as in this show.

Tenor Keith Klassen (Reginald), baritone Robert Longo (Archibald) and mezzo-soprano Lynne McMurtry (Lady Jane) clearly understood G & S stylistically, and their singing and acting were spot on. Klassen and Longo as the two maligned poets, one a genuine aesthete and the other not, and McMurtry as the man-hungry, upper-crust debutante long past her prime, were also very funny. Collectively, they were as good as G & S gets.

The rest of the cast, however, was uneven, the best of which were baritone Bryan Estabrooks (Major Murgatroyd) and mezzo-soprano Loralie Kirkpatrick (Lady Angela), who both showed strong vocal and acting skills. Mezzo-soprano Roz McArthur (Lady Saphir) and soprano Tammy Everett (Lady Ella) also acquitted themselves well.--Paula Citron

Tafelmusik, Canada's premiere Baroque orchestra, mounted about two-thirds of Purcell's music for the semi-opera *The Fairy Queen*, interpolated with scenes from Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (Nov. 29). The clever script was by Larry Beckwith and Derek Boyes, based on their version for Toronto Masque Theatre. The text was at a minimum, but as recited by excellent actors Derek Boyes and Ann-Marie MacDonald, it was top of the line--including minimal props such as scarves, hats and tool belts to denote character.

The heart, of course, was Purcell's music, and British conductor/harpsichordist Richard Egarr was a splendid find. He pours his body into the music, and his sensitivity to text is marvellous. Under him, the excellent Tafelmusik choir and orchestra were superb.

The major soloists included Canadian soprano Laurie Reviol and baritone Olivier Laquerre, and American hautecontre Marc Molomot in a variety of roles. All radiated personality and strong voices, and contributed to the grand evening. Reviol makes her home in Frankfurt and has an outstanding European career. She sports a light, bright voice, but she is also a very good actress and can play with nuance. The clarity of her sound is astonishing, and there is a bit of bite for substance. Laquerre just keeps getting better. His acting skills have come on apace, and his beautiful voice has added some robustness to the sweetness. Molomot is one of the United States's most honored early-music tenors, and he can mould his voice to move from breathiness to ringing declamation. His is a pure sound that can take on color at will.--Paula Citron

Now in its 10th year, Opera York is adopting a new strategy for the 2006-7 season, reducing the number of fully staged operas from four to two while devoting more resources to each opera to ensure higher musical and production values. The result was immediately noticeable in its first production of the year, a highly enjoyable *Le nozze di Figaro*. The opening-night

performance at Markham Theatre (Nov. 16) played to a large and enthusiastic audience. The show featured an ensemble cast of capable young singers with fresh voices, under the assured leadership of conductor Geoffrey Butler, who managed to elicit a good sound from the 20-member orchestra, although the horn player came to grief on a number of occasions. The unit set by Frank Pasion was simple, but generally effective, and the traditional costumes were pleasing to the eye. OY deserves kudos for adopting surtitles, but, as in last season's *Suor Angelica*/Gianni Schicchi double bill, they were marred by glitches in the execution, a situation that should be fixed before *La traviata* in the spring.

Heading the cast was a frequent guest and the biggest star of OY, baritone Andrew Tees as Figaro. Easily the most experienced and accomplished of the principals, he dominated all his scenes and his big, rich baritone never sounded better. He was well partnered by the charming Susanna of soprano Lucia Cesaroni. Also notable was the Count of Matthew Zadow in an impressive role debut. His handsome stage presence combined with a pleasing lyric baritone made his Almoviva less of a cad than usual. An excellent Cherubino, Romanian mezzo Adriana Albu sang with nice tone and looked every bit the love-struck teenager. Too bad she was hampered by the lack of a raked stage--her escape into the garden was in plain view of the audience. Perhaps not ideally cast as the Countess, soprano Stacie Carmona was a little steely and short-breathed in "Porgi amor," but warmed up sufficiently for the all-important "Dove sono." The smaller roles were all well taken. This production was an auspicious start to the new season.--Joseph So

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