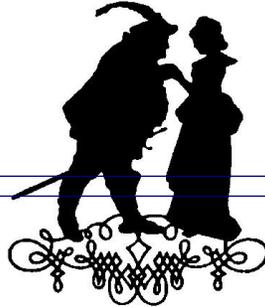


# Opera con Brio

Richard B. Beams



## A Scintillating *La Straniera*

Washington Concert Opera, November 19, 2017

After a compelling afternoon with Handel's *Alcina* by Washington National Opera, I wasn't sure how I'd respond to an evening performance of Bellini's all-too-rarely-performed "La Straniera," just forty-five minutes later by nearby Washington Concert Opera. But after a brisk walk from the Kennedy Center to the George Washington University campus, I was ready - and the moment Conductor Antony Walker signaled for the first few notes, I was hooked. What a performance! I've only heard the opera two other times that I can recall: the Spoleto Festival in Charleston in 1989 (with Carol Neblett and Marcello Giordani) and a concert performance by Eve Queller and Opera Orchestra of New York (with Renee Fleming and Gregory Kunde).



Javier Arrey as Valdeburgo; Gerard Schneider as Arturo; Amanda Woodbury as Alaïde  
Photo: Don Lassell

Happily, WCO's performance was the best, aided especially by tenor Gerard Schneider as Arturo, fresh from Wexford. As there (both in recital and in the lead of *Risurrezione*), he was wonderfully articulate with Bellini's radically syllabic text and exhibited impressive

legato phrasing in Bellini's numerous arioso passages, with moments of exquisite mezzo-voce as well as full fortissimo. Soprano Amanda Woodbury as Alaïde (whom I did not know) was his equal in every way - with a clarion top, right from her entrancing off-stage

entrance with harp accompaniment and ensuing *romanza*. In the famous final aria of the evening – the difficult prayer “Che pietoso” – she exhibited complete mastery of the kind of “long long long melodies,” in the words of Verdi, for which Bellini was so famous. It was announced she had been under the weather during the week, but you’d never have known it from her exhilarating performance.

The young mezzo Corrie Stallings as Isoletta was quite fine too, as was the robust baritone Javier Arrey (a Concert Opera favorite) as Valdeburgo. Their unadorned Act I duet was aptly expressive, and Mr. Arrey’s impassioned duetting with Mr. Schneider in Act II was one of the evening’s many highlights.

But best of all was the sensitivity of Artistic Director and Conductor Antony Walker to every nuance of Bellini, with *rubato* that wonderfully expanded or held phrases to fit the moment for both chorus and soloists. As for orchestral coloring, the mysterious chiaroscuro in the prelude to the Act I finale, for example, admirably caught the tension both in nature (the ensuing storm) and the hearts of the ever-suffering protagonists. It was a passionate performance and a thrilling night, putting to rest any fears on my part of a letdown after my brisk walk.

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Corrie Stallings as Isoletta with the Orchestra and Chorus of Washington Concert Opera conducted by Maestro Antony Walker, WCO Artistic Director Photo: Don Lassell