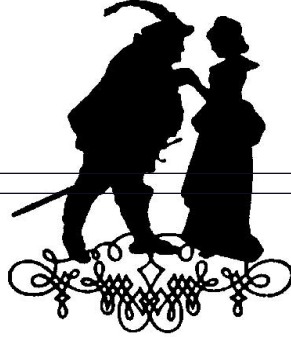


# Opera con Brio

Richard B. Beams



## *Mosè in Egitto* Triumphs at City Center New York City Opera, 2013

With a stunning young cast and bold new production of Rossini's monumental *Mosè in Egitto*, New York City Opera returned, after some 48-years, to City Center, the theater that in 1944 gave birth to the company. Having fled to Lincoln Center's New York State Theater in 1965, the return of the now itinerant company to the more intimate and acoustically-friendly theater made possible the kind of visceral impact Rossini's classically molded, taut music drama can have. Combining both the Exodus with a love story involving the Pharaoh's son, Osiride, and the young Israelite woman, Elcia, this 1818 *azione tragico-sacra* as performed by this innovative company made palpable both the powerful narrative of disputed homelands and also the inherent tension of the archetypal plot of love versus duty.

Credit must first go to the production team led by Michael Counts and his inventive staging that so effectively incorporated revolutionary video panning as a viable dramatic entity. In an interview with CLASSICAL TV, Mr. Counts explained how his "cinematic opera" allowed the sweep camera to capture the inner and outer journey of his characters:



David Salsbery Fry as Mosè Photo: Carol Rosegg

Part of my interest is taking the audience on a journey...With film, you're essentially in the camera—the camera is your lens, and it takes you as it floats up and pans around things and it flies up in the air, which I've often tried to do in a theatrical context. So I wanted to put an audience for an opera effectively in the camera...We've used a lot of technology to create what are effectively camera

pans, and the camera encircling the scene, and cameras flying up over clouds, traveling across the desert from where Pharaoh is to where Moses is, etc., and parting the Red Sea. So it's very cinematic.

The video images by visual designer Ada Whitney typically fill large LED screens in the back of the stage, expanding on effects pioneered in the production of *Ciro in Babilonia* at Caramoor and then at Pesaro's Rossini Festival in the summer of 2012. The videos shift between stark black and white abstraction and extensive realistic images of everything from desert to cave, from sunset to rolling storm clouds, to starry night. Stunning lighting effects complement these images (with much credit to lighting designer Ryan O'Gara). The opening scene, of the Egyptians mired in darkness, is one of the most striking Rossini ever composed, with its somber c minor string figuration weaving beneath the broken mutterings of the dismayed Egyptians. The production's opening tableau instantly catches the essence of this moment.



The Opening Tableau

Photo: Carol Rosegg

With the terrified Egyptians frozen on stage, starkly highlighted and only moving occasionally in slow motion, the majestic c minor *Introduzione* unfolds with beautifully nuanced phrasing from the orchestra; soon light is restored, with Moses' solemn invocation "Eterno! immenso! incomprendibile Dio!" (still in c minor, with hieratic trombones, horns, winds, and low brass). The brilliant C Major transformation brings first a brilliantly realistic backdrop of stars on the giant screen, stunning in itself (an image that will be recaptured at the opera's end.) Only with the warm glow of the following F Major quintet of amazement, a pseudo-canon for violas, cellos, and harp, does a sunrise bathe an expansive desert on the

screen, embracing in its radiance the humanity on stage. It was one of the most beautiful and effective cinematic images (tableaux) I have ever seen on stage.

Back at Lincoln Center, the MET struggles to make the exorbitantly expensive and cumbersome Lepage *Ring*, with its lumbering "machine," a viable dramatic entity; that production, alas, although containing moments of acrobatic splendor, fails at the fundamental level of basic human drama. It is no wonder that outside of City Center on 55<sup>th</sup> Street when I attended on the final night of the production of *Mosè*, many held up signs looking for tickets, and that the line for returned tickets was so long. By contrast, at NYCO's former neighbor the Met, even during a Wagner anniversary year, there was little interest in last minute ticket sales for a performance of *Die Walküre* in an auditorium riddled with empty seats.

Some of the most impressive images were those of swirling dark clouds rolling over expansive desert scenes, harbingers often of realistic bolts of lightning that punctuated the stage action, ushering in plagues or striking dead the defiant. Earlier in this act came one of the most effective (and illustrative) examples of cinematic panning, when the befuddled Osiride leads his beloved Elcia to a cave in the desert. The two walk toward the audience, in place on a revolving turntable (much as the doomed young lovers, also seeking escape, had done in the recent Wexford Festival production of Delius' beautiful *A Village Romeo and Juliette* in the famous Walk to Paradise Garden). With the panning of the camera, they move closer and closer to the cave, as the desert recedes in the distance, often viewed from different angles. After their poignant duet, a clandestine moment of peace, the lens eases back to the glare of the desert, exposing them to discovery by Amaltea and Aaron,



Randall Bills (Osiride) and Siân Davies (Elcia) Photo: Carol Rosegg



Outside of the cave: Aldo Caputo (Aronne), Keri Alkema (Amaltea), Siân Davies (Elcia), and Randall Bills (Osiride)  
Photo: Carol Rosegg

and initiating the famous quartet “Mi manca la voce.” We in the audience have indeed not just journeyed with this pair in their beleaguered flight, but in their inner plight as well.



The quartet: Aldo Caputo (Aronne), Siân Davies (Elcia), Randall Bills (Osiride), Keri Alkema (Amaltea) Photo: Carol Rosegg

Of course film alone won't do it; none of this would have worked so well without the sterling musical forces that accompanied this cinematic drama. In the title role, bass-baritone David Salsbery Frey, replacing the indisposed David Cushing, was a compelling Moses, soft-toned but embodying the grand stature of the role. The cast's second bass-baritone, Wayne Tigges, as the Egyptian Pharaoh (Faraone) was an

equally compelling antagonist, often explosive and vehement in his fiery articulation of Rossini's ornamentations (as in the angry aria “Cade dal ciglio il velo” countering his wife, Amaltea, in the first act). A highlight was the Act II duet with his son, Osiride, sung by the engaging lyric tenor Randall Bills, whose effortless legato so effectively counterpointed the gruff staccato of his father. All in all, Mr. Bills' tenor was right on all evening, equally expressive, for example, in his duet with Elcia in the cave, as he coped effortlessly with the often-high tessitura and ample fioritura Rossini provides for him.



Wayne Tigges as Faraone

Photo: Carol Rosegg

Effective also were the women of the cast, notably the lovely lyric Soprano Sian Davies as Elcia and the equally radiant soprano Keri Alkema as Amaltea. I had heard Ms. Davies perform Elcia in a recent production at Chicago Opera Theatre,



Randall Bills as Osiride and Siân Davies as Elcia Photo: Carol Rosegg

her professional debut role. She triumphed in New York once again, especially in the wide-ranging double aria closing Act II (a sure showpiece for Isabella Colbran at the Naples premiere in 1818). There was a poignant expressiveness to the lovely legato line in the opening movement sung quietly to Osiride (“Porgi la destra amata”); a compelling, even thrilling, cabaletta closed the scene after Osiride’s death (“Tormenti, affanni, e smanie,” rich in effortless coloratura.

Added to this was the mostly idiomatic singing in even the smaller roles (tenors Aldo Caputo and Zachary Finkelstein as Aronne and Mambre respectively, and mezzo soprano Emily Righter as Amenofi, who also effectively took the role in the Chicago production). This was a captivating night of wonderful Rossini singing, equivalent to the best nights in the annual Rossini Festival in Pesaro. On top of that, the entire performances benefited from the spirited conducting of Jayce Ogren, who brought out the necessary subtle shadings of many passages, as well as the majesty of others. I especially liked the bel canto flow to pieces like the exquisite quartet above, (“Mi manca la voce”), perhaps the most famous number of the score, too often treated as though it were the expanded and heavier chorus of stasis it becomes in the later Paris version.

In the end the New York City Opera succeeded admirably in fulfilling their historic mission of bringing “fresh and exciting opera to new audiences.” This thrilling performance, with a talented cast, bold staging and innovative cinematic panning, did just that. On stage, the Met may be struggling with its new *Ring*; but a recent note in the Met program book for *Die Walküre* (a fine essay by Paul Thomson) makes a comment about that wonderful opera which is equally applicable to Rossini’s monumental *Mosè in Egitto*:

... the outer events are relatively simple. But the inner journey of the characters is uncommonly rich and complex. It’s the difference between flying from New York to California and driving there. You fly because you want to get to your destination as quickly as possible. But if you drive, the journey itself becomes the point.

As promised, director Michal Counts, with his stunning “cinematic opera” indeed took us on a journey to be savored. It helps too, of course, that the “Swan of Pesaro,” Gioachino Rossini, provided the map. What a journey it was.

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