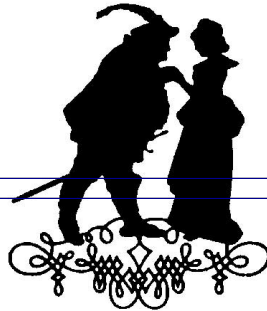


Opera con Brio

Richard B. Beams



Tancredi in Philly

A Happy Marriage of Music and Drama

From February 10 – 19, 2017, giving welcome respite to a blizzard blanketing the East Coast, Opera Philadelphia presented the company premiere of one of Rossini's most lyrical operas, *Tancredi*. The performances, in the historic Academy of Music, were a success on every level, reminding one once again that Rossini not only wrote some of the most exquisite and fluent vocal music ever penned, but that he took this *melodrama eroico* seriously. The attractive production, from Opera de Lausanne and Teatro Municipal de Santiago, with modernized neoclassic sets that moved the action from Sicily around 1000 AD to Europe at the end of World War I, provided an eloquent complement to Rossini's music, which in the end, after all, is what the evening is all about.

The performance reviewed here, on Sunday Feb. 12, was on a level that illustrates why some regard operatic singing as the highest of all human arts. Heading the cast, mezzo-soprano Stephanie Blythe made her highly anticipated return to Philadelphia for her stage debut in the titular trouser role of Tancredi, the exiled lover/warrior tormented by contrived uncertainties. None



Stephanie Blythe as Tancredi Kelly & Massa Photography

of us were around to hear the great Spanish mezzo-soprano Maria Malibran sing the demanding role for the first New York performance in 1825 (just a few years after its Venice premiere in 1813); but many today still associate the role with the great American mezzo Marilyn Horne. Her consummate performances made the impossible sound easy and were largely responsible for the resurgence of this opera in the 1970's and 1980's with its newly discovered tragic ending inspired by Voltaire, which Opera Philadelphia used.

Stephanie Blythe belongs in this league, and she commanded the stage with her formidable presence and vocal artistry from the start. The richness of her voice, with especially arresting low notes, enchanted right from her famed opening aria, “De tanti palpiti,” albeit in a somewhat cautious interpretation. Her easy command of bel canto technique flowered as the evening wore on, especially in the second act, showing off the extraordinary 2½ octave range at her command in the demanding descents, ascents, roulades and the like that Rossini requires. Of equal importance was her dramatic intelligence in the recitatives, and most moving of all was her breathtaking final arioso of the unorthodox pianissimo tragic finale. Blythe was simply mesmerizing, cradled in the arms of “his” beloved Amenaide, her soft sustained phrases cradled too by the hushed strings from the sensitive conductor, Corrado Rovaris.



Brenda Rae as Amenaide Kelly & Massa Photography

The performance of American soprano Brenda Rae, in both her company and role debut, was just as compelling. With pure tone and liquid coloratura, she served as the perfect complement to her statuesque lover, Tancredi, who remains convinced through most of the opera of her infidelity. This engaging young soprano was less familiar to many in the audience, perhaps because much of her career has been in Germany, primarily with her home company, Oper Frankfurt. I have been fortunate to hear her in many diverse roles, beginning with her highly acclaimed US operatic stage debut in Santa Fe in 2013 as Violetta in *La Traviata* (and in the same year as Polissena in a concert *Radamisto* with the English

Concert at Carnegie Hall.) She is simply an exquisite, tireless artist, with not a trace of hard edge in her silken tone. Indeed she brought the same emotional commitment to Philadelphia that she always brings to her varied roles – in this case that of a virtuous woman, beset by emotional turmoil, who would do anything not to betray her lover.

Among her many highlights as Amenaide was her prayer to protect Tancredi in the second act, “Giusto Dio,” delivered with beautiful legato phrasing. Pinpoint coloratura technique soon followed in her ebullient cabaletta, capping a scene displaying a voice of tremendous agility, accuracy, and focus. Of course the two moments that best define the couple’s confused and ill-fated relationship are their two magnificent grand duets, one in each act, each an archetype of Rossini’s long-lined lyrical pathos. The poignant intermingling and blend of the two was captivating, especially in the Second Act duet “Lasciami non t’ascolto,” one of the evening’s many showstoppers - bel canto artistry at its best.

A company debut was that of the young tenor Michele Angelini in the role of Amenaide’s father, Argirio. He too negotiated his role’s florid passages with much aplomb. With a lighter weight voice (as Rossini surely intended in this role), his purity of tone helped contribute to the expressive, if sometimes labored, soliloquies of Act II, which over all were quite touching. As the vengeful foil, Orbazzano, the local baritone Daniel Mobbs was a forceful presence. One wishes Rossini had at least given him an aria!



Michele Angelini as Argirio; Daniel Mobbs as Orbazzano
Kelly & Massa Photography

An added bonus to the evening was how well two fine mezzo-sopranos sang a pair of secondary roles, the charismatic Allegra De Vita as Amenaide's friend Isaura and Opera Philadelphia Emerging Artist Anastasiia Sidorova in the trouser role of Roggiero, Tancredi's squire. Waiting by the cloakroom after the performance, a local patron, still sorting out the nuances of the plot, but enchanted with these two characters, asked why these two, superfluous to the plot, were even in the opera. I answered simply, "*aria di sorbetti* are always a treat." These were indeed. Happily Opera Philadelphia chose not to cut these delightful so-called "sherbet" arias, as is too often the practice of other theatres.

The focus of the plot is of course on the star-crossed lovers. *Tancredi* is not realistic drama – a few simple explanations along the way might easily have resolved the issues about a virtuous woman wrongly accused of treason. The point is to provide the singers every opportunity, at the least provocation, to sing - and everything about the production supported this aesthetic. Daniel Bianco's dark, monumental unit set, with flexible sides angling in at times, could become amply spacious or claustrophobic as the situation required. Strikingly, the opening set recalled the Hall of Mirrors at Versailles, instantly helping to update the action to the post World War I era circa 1919, at the place where the treaty ending the war was signed. The ever-shifting, but usually uncluttered space, helped sustain our focus on what counted most, the singers.

So too did Emilio Sagi's sensitive stage directions. His blocking always supported the telling moments of angst and conflict, and he artfully employed elements of scenic design to advantage. At one point the bereaved Amenaide at the side of the stage leans on one of the Academy's majestic neo-classic columns; at another, her confident, Isaura (Allegra De Vita), praying for Amenaide's well being, has her tiny frame pressed against a massive pillar suggesting the cold, unforgiving world around her. (No wonder my friend from the cloakroom was so captivated!) At the other extreme, Sagi placed Tancredi in the final death scene at the foot of a grand Baroque funerary monument typical of the French



Brenda Rae as Amenaide; Stephanie Blythe as Tancredi
Kelly & Massa Photography

palace, brought to the front of the stage, providing a powerful tableau, which countered the cold, fatalistic circumstance precipitating this bitter end. The tableau also stood in dramatic contrast to the black background, a stark expansive void, in which Tancredi had first entered in the opera.

The fine lighting by Eduardo Bravo further enhanced the dramatic focus. At the historic 1983 Carnegie Hall concert performance of *Tancredi* with Marilyn Horne, the lights were dimmed gradually to underline the tragic moment; Mr. Bravo achieved a similar effect in Philadelphia in the final tableau. But more important, his lighting always effectively highlighted the singers' shifting predicaments and the libretto's shifting locals – especially helpful in the omnipresent unit set with all its permutations. At only one point did the production team falter. Late in the opera, Tancredi wanders, gloomy and pensive, amidst the darkened unit set which substitutes for the "mountains and plunging ravines" that the libretto demands. As Tancredi's knights search for him, Bravo and his director alas resorted to the clichés of overturned chairs and piercing flashlights. But over all, the lighting illuminated character and circumstance wonderfully, often highlighting the lavish costumes by Pepa Ojanguren that caught the fashion of the times so well.

Paralleling this sensitive lighting and direction were the all-important musical forces of the Opera Philadelphia Orchestra led by conductor Corrado Rovaris, a Rossini specialist par excellence. He instinctively provided his singers with a warm cushion of orchestral sound, always coaxing an appropriate flow of melody from Rossini's classical, almost chamber-like textures. Indeed it was this spirit of collaboration that provided such an apt realization of this austere *melodrama eroico*. With a consummate restrained elegance appropriate to Rossini's score, Opera Philadelphia and Maestro Rovaris took the opera as seriously as Rossini did, maintaining the *serioso tinta* right to the end.

A recent, highly praised production of *Tancredi* by Opera Southwest in Albuquerque also closed the opera with the tragic Ferrara finale. As reported by my friend and colleague Charles Jernigan, the audience then rose to its collective feet applauding, (as they did in Philadelphia). But the conductor stopped the applause, announcing from the orchestra pit that the opera originally ended happily at its premiere in Venice –and proceeded to play that happy ending. While more Rossini is always nice (and especially illustrative in this case), I was glad Maestro Rovaris chose to leave the audience not with a happy marriage, but with the happy marriage of music and drama at its best. That was enough.

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Inside the Academy of Music in Philadelphia

Photo by B. Krist for Visit Philadelphia