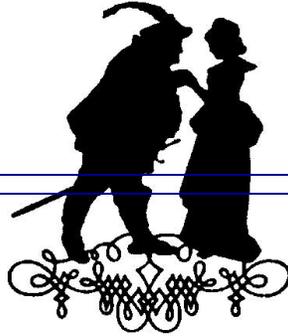


Opera con Brio

Fall 2010
Richard B. Beams



Wexford Festival Opera 2010 Back on a Winning Track

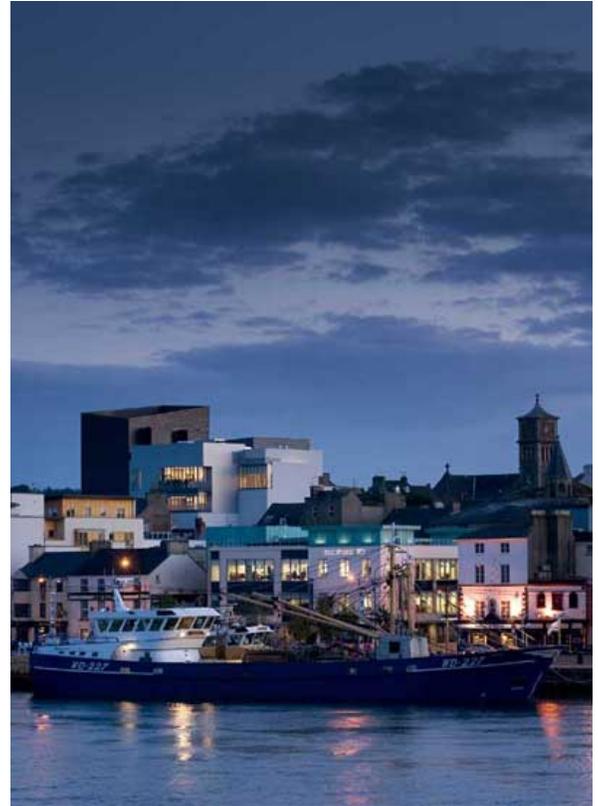
Wexford Festival Opera, now in its 59th year, is back on a winning track. Having moved into a grand new theatre two years ago, just as a crippling recession hit, survival, as for many companies, has been precarious indeed. But survive it has, glowingly, after a scaled-back season last year missing the very popular ShortWorks operas. However, this year's expanded season not only brought these back but also offered three first-rate productions in the main house, as well as a full schedule of daytime concerts. Although I was unable to attend any orchestral and choral concerts, the varied performances I did attend attest not only to a revitalized Festival but also to its continued high standards of artistic achievement. During three sparkling, sunny days, October 19-21, these performances included: the three main stage operas, three ShortWorks operas, and three of the twelve daytime recitals. Three sparkling days indeed!

The Main Stage Operas

A triumphant *Kiss*

The jewel of the Wexford season was Bedřich Smetana's charming 1876 folk opera *Hubička* (*The Kiss*), which he himself dubbed a "simple national opera...a thoroughly dignified comedy," full of natural and irresistible humor. And so it was in Wexford, in a simple yet captivating production. Unlike their 1974 performance in English, Wexford presented the opera in the original Czech. In 2012 Opera Theatre of St. Louis will perform this shared production, in English, as they always do. Indeed the only Czech-language performance of the opera I have heard in the United States was by the equally enterprising Sarasota Opera in 1991, which had the advantage of the well traveled Czech Coach and Consultant, Eveta Synek Graff.

Wexford had an equivalent advantage, with Czech conductor Jaroslav Kyzlink's warm and vibrant reading of this rich, colorful score, and with the Prague Chamber Choir, led ably (as always at the Rossini Opera Festival) by



Waterfront view of the Wexford Opera House
Photo: Ros Kavanagh

Chorus Master Lubomír Mátl. The chorus took on, as it should, a personality of its own, interjecting its peasant wisdom into the rustic, seemingly naïve plot in which Lukáš, a widower, wants to kiss Vendulka, his first love, at their betrothal. She refuses, however, and insists, out of respect for Lukáš' dead wife, on waiting until after the wedding. They quarrel and each for a while reacts in his or her equally headstrong manner, only to finally make up - and kiss - at the curtain.

As Smetana's biographer, Brian Large, points out, the framework is certainly slender, but as a musical experience, it is a very different matter: "That Smetana has produced a score so warm, genial, felicitous and enchanting is one of the miracles of music when one remembers that because of his total deafness he was [in his own words in an 1877 letter] 'unable to hear even one of the thousands of notes I have written down in *The Kiss*.'" It was no small matter, then, for the Wexford Festival audience to hear such a rich and idiomatic performance of a work that is so rarely aired outside of the Czech Republic.



Smetana's *The Kiss* Photo: Clive Barda

But there was much more that helped bring the charm of this work to life. The set was a wooden cyclorama framing the stage action; its sliding panels helped bring focus to the folksy characters, in their slightly updated attire and their relatively static interactions. In contrast, neither of the other two operas performed on the main stage at Wexford this year are works meant to present characters of flesh and feeling. Instead they are puffed up with Romantic hyperbole (*Virginia*) or exaggerated fantasy (*The Golden Ticket*). Smetana, however, was especially concerned with the antithesis of such distortion, the realistic portrayal of character. And indeed he creates characters of persuasive subtlety, who react and develop according to the rise and fall of their emotional temperaments - vividly, spontaneously.

Such were the portrayals Wexford brought to the production. Foremost were the well-matched two leads, South African soprano Pumeza Matschikiza and Slovakian tenor Peter Berger. The singing and acting of each brought out credible characterizations indeed. Ms. Matshikiza's warmth of tone was especially expressive in her hushed prayer and lullaby in Act I, and Mr. Berger's bright tone and ringing clarity were especially suited to Lukáš' more volatile nature. Equally effective in supporting roles were two singers well-versed in Czech: rich-toned mezzo Eliska Weissová, as Vendulka's sympathetic and cunning aunt; and the solid bass, Jiří Přibýl, Vendulka's stubborn, cautioning father, although at times his stooped posturing became almost caricature.

These characters belong to a different world than that of Smetana's well known earlier opera, the *Bartered Bride*, whose protagonists,



Pumeza Matshikiza and Peter Berger in *The Kiss* Photo: Clive Barda

Jeník and Mařenka, come from the Bohêmeian countryside. Lukáš and Vendulka instead hail from a mountainous countryside near the Saxon border. Superstition is a key element (as also in Weber's *Der Freischütz*, set in the same region). The director, Michael Gieleta, nicely stresses this fact in the protective circle Vendulka traces for the deceased mother around the child's cradle before she sings her haunting lullaby. While the withheld kiss at the opera's outset may be seen as metaphor for withheld sexual activity, or more plausibly a nod of respect for the deceased wife, it is fundamentally rooted in the element of superstition, so rightly emphasized in this production.

Smetana's immediately preceding opera, the delightful and buoyant *Two Widows*, was a rather modern one for the time, raising the issue of whether a young widow should mourn for the rest of her life, or go out and get a life. *The Kiss* is a sequel in a way. The opera assumes the answer at the outset: Lukáš will return immediately to his former love. Wexford's staging of a pantomime during Smetana's overture (which in part depicts the love of Lukáš and Vendulka) wonderfully moves us beyond this issue and sets up the current issue - not how long to wait, but how to wait. The pantomime includes a slow funeral procession moving across the stage, Lukáš at its head. Following in the rear is another mourner, Vendulka. The procession pauses, Lukáš walks back to share a tender moment with the woman he is now free to marry. But no kiss... that will come in time!

Ms. Graff, in notes to the 1991 Sarasota opera production, pointed to an interesting footnote regarding Vendulka's father. He wants to caution the young lovers that they may be temperamentally a mismatch; at the same time he wants to rid himself of the petty quarrels of the worldly life in which he finds himself. He constantly tries to make his peace with God, she states, so as to enter heaven with a measure of tranquility. So did Smetana, she writes. As he wrote in his journal of March 1876, just as he finished *The Kiss*, "If my deafness is not curable, then I would prefer to be liberated soon from this painful life."

Happily, Smetana found solace in music. The opera triumphed at its premiere, as it did at Wexford. That it continues to enchant is also the triumph of a person condemned never to hear a note of it.



Opening scene of Mercadante's *Virginia* at Wexford Opera Festival
Photo: Clive Barda

Mercadante's melodrama: a rousing *Virginia*

At quite the other end of the spectrum was the elaborate production of Mercadante's 19th century melodramatic pot-boiler, *Virginia*, an opera whose sprawling plot and noisy score tested the both the credibility and tolerance of the festival audience. A visiting critic warned me before hand that I should just close my eyes and listen and that I wouldn't have any trouble hearing either. The implication was that I should get ready for a combination of "euro-trash" and bombast with yet again a director's "concept" that undermined the essence of the work (so don't watch) and a score whose raw vigor would preclude subtlety of musical expression.

Indeed, the production, which soon moved from the initial ancient Rome called for in the libretto to a contemporary setting, was startling. And the music sometimes overwhelmed with its raucous cymbal crashes. But overall I found that the production – with its apt direction and suitably vibrant musical forces – showed off both Wexford and the opera itself at its best. With a searing dramatic intensity, this neglected opera, for all its overblown romantic melodrama, built inevitably toward the unforgettable and heart-wrenching climax of the final scene.

Although the story centers on the tensions between patricians and plebeians in ancient Rome, it so clearly parallels elements of the more familiar *Rigoletto* that it's hard to imagine Verdi didn't know the work. Like *Rigoletto*, Mercadante's opera had acute censorship problems; *Virginia* could not even premiere in Naples until 1866, although he wrote the opera in 1849, a year before *Rigoletto*. (The librettist for *Virginia*, Salvatore Cammarano, indeed was supervising a production of Verdi's *Luisa Miller* in Naples; soon he would write the fiery libretto for *Il Trovatore*, the first opera to follow Verdi's *Rigoletto* of 1850).

Whatever the case, parallels abound. Each opera opens with the festive triviality of a opening banquet and moves inexorably toward the death of an innocent soprano heroine (Gilda/Virginia) brought about ultimately by the actions of a loving and protective father (Rigoletto/Virginio) - in *Rigoletto* with grim irony, in *Virginia* literally, with the distraught father's final stab to keep his daughter from dishonor and humiliation. It doesn't take long in the opening party scene to see that Appio (a tenor), head of the tyrannical patrician government, is even more of a cad than the Duke of Mantua (and more

brutal as well). Indeed the interruption of this scene by an off stage plebeian funeral procession reminds us of Appio's villainy just as well as does Monterone's interruption in Verdi's scene. Poignant father/daughter and baritone/soprano exchanges, a Sparafucile-like assassin plot, and more of the like complete the parallels.

From old world to new: "timeless threatening marble"

The libretto states that the setting for the opening scene is a "magnificent hall, where Appio is offering his friends and fellow-patricians 'a sumptuous banquet.'" As Director Kevin Newbury describes in his program notes, the production begins with "an opulent, reflective black marble surround, representing the 'old world' decadence of Appio's milieu. Ornate moldings of garland and animal skulls frame the space, while fixed benches - like those found in ancient meeting spaces line the perimeter." Appio and his friends are having an "ostentatious toga party...complete with colorful, festive costumes and a Dionysian banquet table."

After the jarring intrusion of the plebeian funeral procession, Appio – the clear-toned Sicilian tenor Ivan Magri, clad like the others in colorful Roman gear – begins his entry cavatina of passionate longing for Virginia. His henchman, Marco, (sonorous Italian bass Gianluca Buratto) enters wearing a contemporary suit and informs Appio that Virginia has refused his advances. During this important "tempo di mezzo" (the interim material setting up his concluding cabaletta), Marco whispers to his frustrated boss, "Simula...E' il similar vertu" ("Make a pretense...It is a virtue to be able to pretend").

This insinuating line becomes the lynchpin of the production, as the ornate, flamboyant Roman headgear is removed from Appio. The ancient Roman façade soon recedes into the background, and we travel through time to the next scene, which the libretto describes as "a modest vestibule in the house of Virginio." In this production, it is a glistening-white contemporary kitchen that, in the director's words, "floats in the world of Appio's timeless, threatening marble." When Appio, now a slick Mafioso, makes his next entrance, the transformation is complete.

Once one accepts this premise, the production works to stunning effect. I did, and felt the riveting performance worked on many levels. For one thing, there is not an ounce of local color in Mercadante's score (as there is plentifully in Smetana's *The Kiss*). The full-blooded Italianate score, full of passion and raw emotion, is awash in 19th century Italian opera conventions, and the plot's archetypes are also so clear that they transcend boundaries. Mercadante could thus end the



The threatening black marble walls in Wexford's *Virginia*
Photo: Clive Barda



Angela Meade and Hugh Russell in *Virginia*
Photo: Clive Barda

first act simply with a powerful dramatic trio of confrontation between Virginia (soprano Angela Meade), Appio (whom she is trying to get rid of) and Virginia's true love, the motorcycling "plebian" Icilio (stentorian tenor Bruno Ribeiro). The force of the menacing trio surged through the auditorium from their position clustered around a kitchen table. That was all we needed. Did it matter what century we were in? Absolute power corrupts absolutely; when you're in charge you can do as you please, be you Roman patrician as Mafioso or Duke of Mantua as "povera studente." By the end of the opera, we find there are those who may prefer death to dishonor. The horrifying moment of a loving father taking his daughter's life likewise asserted its universally powerful impact.



Angela Meade as Virginia
Photo: Clive Barda

savor such delights.) Still, she was a reasonably full-throated force when need be, and expressive moments were plentiful, especially in the final duet with her father leading to the chilling climax. The marble frame loomed again with imposing force as the horrified spectators, their patience spent, lunged from the row of seats to crush the oppressive tyrant, Appio.

That the performance succeeded so well was also in no small part due to the vocal athleticism of the mostly-male cast, as well as that of the much-anticipated performance of Angela Meade in the demanding lead role. Having heard her in each of her major roles in the last three years – *Anna Bolena* in Philadelphia, then *Semiramide* and finally *Norma* at Caramoor – I must say that Mercadante's Verdian score does not seem to provide her enough opportunity to show off the kind of fluid and subtle *fioritura* she so excels at, especially in the upper registers. (Only in the opening Cabaletta and in her third act prayer did we get to

"A feast for the imagination": *The Golden Ticket*

Wexford's third main-stage opera, *The Golden Ticket*, one must admit, is on the surface a bit of fluff. Much of the critical reaction to this opera, a shared production with the Opera Theater of St. Louis, concerned musical thinness. Yet the work is a delight in the theater and admirably fills out Wexford's usual scheme of including not only neglected masterpieces and relatively unknown works, but also contemporary pieces, typically English language works, either American or British.

In this case, composer Peter Ash and his librettist Donald Sturrock constructed an entertaining bit of elaborate confection derived from Roald Dahl's 1964 children's book *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*. In an informative pre-opera talk, composer and librettist expanded on the creation of the work; one thing that came through clearly was Mr. Ash's affection for the operas of Benjamin Britten. Indeed, for example, I could not hear the galumphing tubas without thinking of Britten's early *Paul Bunyan*, or hear the child and counter tenor roles, or frequent augmented chordal sequences without thinking of the same inventive composer. And so, while "thinness" may be the word for the day, such selective scoring (as with Britten) played to advantage. In the end, the work succeeded well in achieving its aim of a multi-generational appeal, adults and children alike. The Wexford Festival audience, with a bare scattering of children, was not a good test for this; but, as with the best of Britten's works, which have a similar aim, time will tell.



Michael Ash's *The Golden Ticket* at Wexford
Photo: Clive Barda

In the September 2010 issue of *Opera News*, critic Judith Malafronte gave a clear-eyed discussion of this complex twenty-two-scene score as presented first in St. Louis last June, with almost entirely the same cast and conductor (Timothy Redmond). As she pointed out, many of the character sketches for the naughty children, with operatic parodies to suit, are a delight. New to the Wexford cast was American soprano and recent Metropolitan Opera National Council Auditions finalist, Kiera Duffy, whose coloratura mockery was perfect for the obnoxiously vain Violet Beuregard (who in Act II morphs into a giant blueberry and is then juiced). Another of the naughty children who stood out was Canadian counter-tenor David Trudgen, as the gun-toting blob Mike Teavee, with ample Baroque *fioritura* (before he is finally miniaturized for a chocolate promotion on TV.) Mr. Trudgen, in a varied recital two days earlier, had apologized for not singing any Handel. Here, in a parody of Baroque style, he got his chance! (Happily he'll get a chance this spring as well in Boston Lyric Opera's upcoming *Agrippina*.)

Two characters stood apart from mere caricature. One was Charlie's grandfather, Grandpa Joe, sung (as in St. Louis) by Boston's own Frank Kelley, indeed with the kind of warmth, commitment, and charisma audiences here in Boston have come to expect. The other was the extraordinary child role of Charlie himself. Like Britten, Mr. Ash knows how to write effectively for the adolescent voice, and how fortunate he was to have (here and in St. Louis) the accomplished eleven-year-old Michael Kepler Meo. Indeed he brings to this role the impressive credentials and experience of Miles in Britten's *Turn of the Screw*. Charlie, happily, fares better in this opera than the haunted Miles; he eventually inherits the chocolate factory itself. He's had quite a journey – "a feast for the imagination" in the words of Director James Robinson. Let's hope this fanciful operatic journey has continued success. Wexford has given it an encouraging start.



Michael Meo and Frank Kelley in *The Golden Ticket*,
Wexford Festival Opera Photo: Clive Barda

Lunchtime Recitals

An always-attractive feature of the Festival is the lunchtime recitals presented by principal singers from the Company in the attractive venue of St. Iberius Church on Main Street, just across from *Cappuccinos*, my favorite post concert café (and it seems, that of many performers as well.) This year I was able to catch three of the twelve recitals; each was a joy.

The first of these was on October 19 with affable counter-tenor David Trudgen who, having escaped "miniaturization" in Charlie's Chocolate factory, presented a full-blown and indeed imaginative program with only a cursory nod to the more typical Baroque countertenor fare (two Purcell songs and an encore of Handel's familiar "Ombra mai fu" from *Xerxes*). Highlights, showing off Mr. Trudgen's clarity of tone and expressive phrasing, were the short Debussy song cycle *Le promenoir des deux amants*, and the rarely performed Barber song cycle, *Passing Melodies*. Showing his sensitivity to stylish legato phrasing were a Schumann song with a stunning cantabile line, *From Hebrew Melodies*, and an exquisite Brahms song, *The May Night*, a favorite of his which he explained was the first song he ever sang as a countertenor. Again, one especially looks forward to his visit to Boston next spring in *Agrippina*.

On the next night, Ukrainian Baritone Pavel Baransky took some time away from *The Kiss* (as Tomes, brother-in-law to Lukáš) to give hearty renditions of, among other numbers, Tchaikovsky and Rachmaninov songs; the final number of the recital, Roderigo's death scene from Verdi's *Don Carlos*, was especially compelling.

The following night, soprano Angela Meade and her counterpart in *Virginia*, tenor Bruno Ribeiro, were unable to sing. They were replaced at the last minute by three from the cast of *The Golden Ticket* who dipped into their "aria di bagagli" to present an impressive, and at times even thrilling, recital pieced together just that morning from their repertoire. Indeed the spontaneous rescue by these three young artists seemed emblematic of Wexford's admirable penchant for adaptability in the face of daunting odds.

Irish baritone Owen Gilhooley kicked things off appropriately with all the verve and élan needed for Figaro's entrance cavatina "Largo al factotum" from Rossini's *Barber of Seville*. Later he framed the concert, closing it out with a touching rendition of *Bless This House*. Canadian mezzo-soprano Leslie Davis bravely opened with Ariodante's stunning "Doppo Notte," perhaps the most splendid of all Handel's recovery arias. Later she gave expressive weight in Sesto's movingly sung "Parto, ma tu en mio," from Mozart's *La Clamenza di Tito*, to the repeats of the poignant phrase "Guradami," hoping to gain an iota of sympathy from her beloved Vitellia.

However, for me at least, it was the ubiquitous David Trudgen who again stood out, especially in the rarely heard French version of Gluck's well-known "Che faro senza Euridice!" Here, in *Orphée et Euridice* for Paris, Gluck writes for an *haute contre* – a high tenor ranging between that of tenor and countertenor. "J'ai perdu mon Eurydice" seemed particularly suited to Mr. Trudgen's voice; in idiomatic French, he expressively communicated the sense of rising despair in Gluck's new coda, added to heighten the atmosphere of noble tragedy.

ShortWorks: A Trilogy of Theatrical Hits

All in all, the daytime concerts emphasized once again the extraordinary depth of talent and commitment of the young singers who effectively contribute to the success of Wexford Festival Opera. The same can be said of the three ShortWorks presented away from the Opera House itself, this year in the spacious, but rather uninviting and acoustically difficult conference room of White's Hotel just down the street. No matter; the memorable and even riveting performances themselves made up for it – and it was infinitely better than the previous year when economic necessity had curtailed any performances whatsoever. The three productions this year were as varied as could be: Richard Wargo's 1999 one-act "ballad" opera, *Winners*; Pergolesi's 1733 charming intermezzo *La serva padrona*; and Puccini's ever-green *La Bohème*, presented in an abbreviated "pocket" version of one long act. In their own ways, each, against all odds, in an unrewarding space, using adaptations with just piano accompaniment, was a significant success.



White's Hotel

Richard Wargo's poignant *Winners*

Although *Winners* was not the audience favorite, I particularly liked it, perhaps because I know the composer himself, whom *Opera News* once hailed as “a born opera composer.” This was precisely my thought when in the early 1990's I heard his opera, *A Chekhov Trilogy*, based on short stories of Anton Chekhov, on the intimate stage of Philadelphia's Academy of Vocal Arts. In addition, I was probably one of the few in the audience who had seen a previous staging of the opera before, as part of Boston University's 2004 Fall Fringe Festival in the more hospitable Huntington Theater's second stage (studio 210). There it was presented as *Bellmore Part One; Winners*, a setting of the first of two one-act plays (operas) by Irish playwright Brian Friel, *Winners and Losers*.

Both are set in Ballymore, a fictional town in Northern Ireland. *Winners* is simply, in Mr. Wargo's words, “a depiction of the last day on Earth of two young lovers, destined to die by day's end in a boating accident.” Two Ballad Singers (attractively sung by mezzo soprano Jennifer Berkebile and Boston's own Adam Cannedy, baritone) intermittently look back and narrate the lovers' story with poignant irony, as we in the audience share with the young couple, Mag and Joe, their alternately buoyant, playful, gently argumentative, happily frivolous last day of life. As Mr. Wargo comments in the program note, they are “winners” because “they leave this world with all their joy and enthusiasm intact. They die without being disillusioned by life.”

Soprano and tenor, Mag and Joe (Kristy Swift and Robert Gardiner) created an endearing young couple, romping atop a bare crescent stage, before a barren backdrop, oblivious to all but themselves on a perfect day. As the ballad singers' refrain keeps reminding us, it is a clear day, no wind, and 77 degrees. The couple's euphoric exit through the audience, skipping out to the waiting boat, leaves not many eyes dry. “They die with dreams in their eyes and hope in their hearts,” comments the director Michael Shell, “and we see them not only in this moment but in all time, and we share in their triumph.” It is this that the simple set, sensitive direction, and effective performance capture perfectly.



Kristy Swift and Robert Gardiner in *Winners* Photo: Clive Barda

La Serva Padrona: a nod to the Pergolesi tri-centennial

The year 2010, now drawing to a close, has witnessed the celebration of many composers' anniversaries: Mahler, born 150 years ago in 1860; Schumann and Chopin, some 200 years ago in 1810. Reaching back even further, music organizations and festivals throughout the world have been honoring another important anniversary, that of Giovanni Battista Pergolesi, famed member of the Neapolitan School, born three hundred years ago in 1710. The Rossini Festival in August, in collaboration with the Fondazione Pergolesi of Jesi, dedicated an entire concert to his works, including rarely performed Cantatas for soprano and strings, and his gentle, intimate *Stabat Mater*. In the same month The Innsbruck Early Music Festival mounted certainly the most memorable of all the anniversary events with a production his sprawling “opera seria,” *L'Olimpiade* of 1735. Not to be left out, Wexford presented his landmark comic intermezzo, *La Serva Padrona*, as much a smash hit in the Festival as it was in 1733, the year it premiered.

An idiomatic *L'Olimpiade* in Innsbruck

But first a note on *L'Olimpiade*, which was a stunning success in Innsbruck, although it was not at its premiere in Rome in 1735. What made it so was the combination of idiomatic conducting by Alessandro de March (the new artistic director of the Festival), the refined and stylish playing from Academia Montis Regalis, the ensemble of young singers well versed in the Baroque idiom as well, and a clean production, with no extraneous directorial impositions, that let the purity of the music come through to articulate character and situation.

Who would have thought that five hours (yes five hours with just two short intermissions!) of da capo arias of all sorts could hold an audience so well? Who would have thought that a text by the formidable Pietro Metastasio, set often by other composers (including Vivaldi just one year before), could be so skillfully manipulated to dramatic effect, especially with such an abundance of recitative? Yet the evening flew by. For me, the opera was a revelation: a brilliant, inventive work of a young genius who would die in just one year at age 26, bridging the gap between the fading Baroque of Handel and the emerging classicism of Gluck and Mozart. Leaving at midnight, following cheers by the audience, I wished the performance were starting all over again. (Happily, Sony recorded the evening for a soon-to-be released CD.)



L'Olimpiade at the Innsbruck Festival of Early Music, August, 2010 Photo: Rupert Larl



Roberto Recchia as Vespone and Ekaterina Bakanová as Serpina in *La Serva Padrona* Photo: Clive Bardo

A cabaret style *La Serva Padrona* in Wexford

With Wexford's production of *La Serva Padrona* –and indeed with the work itself – we are at the opposite end of the spectrum. This is not to suggest a flawed afternoon's entertainment, a lesser piece, or a lack of audience enthusiasm (they loved every minute of it and cheered at the end). Indeed the miniature opera buffa itself is a work of true genius if ever there was one, initiating the thread of buffo character and vitality that would last all the way through Donizetti's *Don Pasquale* more than a century later. What this production did with this little jewel, however, was to expand its fundamentally *commedia dell'arte* roots with an overlay of excessively elaborate staging and hyperbolic, improvisatory humor. It was all great fun, especially if one accepted the admonition of stage director Roberto Recchia who, in his impromptu prologue, admonished the audience to just forget the rest of the world, turn off your cell phones, relax, and have fun. I did just that.

Set designer Kate Guinness had replaced the previous day's sparse set for *Winners* with a sprawling cabaret-style set, which seemed to suggest that the expansive bar in the White's Hotel lobby downstairs had expanded further to the second floor. The updating was instant, and the tone evident from the start, as Mr. Recchia, behind the bar as people were taking their seats, sipped from a liquor bottle on the shelf. Instead of Pergolesi's servant who becomes mistress, we soon encountered in the opera a spunky waitress who hooks the befuddled maitre d'. Mr. Recchia, it turns out, becomes the mute servant, Vespone, who might have stolen the show with all the *commedia dell'arte* antics, often involving unsuspecting members of the audience sitting at café tables, had not the lively pair of Serpina (Russian soprano Ekaterina Bakanová) and Uberto (American bass Bradley Smoak) been so compelling themselves. It was all great fun indeed, if not too idiomatic. I exited quickly, but in high spirits, for a pint of Guinness at the downstairs bar.

Packing a punch: *La Bohème* in miniature

If *La Serva Padrona* was a popular highlight of the festival, so was the consistently sold out "pocket" performance of Puccini's *La Bohème* the next day. The director again was Mr. Recchia who, as with *Soeur Angelica* two years ago, displayed his sensitivity to dramatic nuance in a chamber context. With all the full-scale, fully orchestrated *La Bohèmes* I've seen in my life, I went with fear and trepidation to this reduced, one act version accompanied only by piano. What could one possibly cut from this iconic work? How could one fathom not savoring the rich and expressive orchestral score? As the director

himself cautioned in the program notes, what hope was there for yet another updating this iconic work of music theater? Well, it must be admitted, *La Bohème* "always packs a punch" as the gentleman from Belfast sitting next to me said at the performance's end. And that it did!

The Bohèmeians are still in Paris. But the year is 1940, a delicate historic moment for France, as Mr. Recchia states in the notes. They are part of the resistance movement of the period and thus forced to live underground. Musetta's pompous admirer, Alcindoro, is now a stiff German Officer; Mimi herself, a young, frightened Jewish girl, soon to wear her Star of David badge. Gaps between the abbreviated acts are filled with black and white newsreel footage from this unsettling period, bringing a sense of grim inevitability and focus. Following Mimi's death and Rodolfo's poignant "Mimi...Mimi," the remaining victims of the occupying regime turn silently from the audience, tying white bandages over their eyes, awaiting the inevitable. Mimi's story becomes the Bohèmeians' story as well. Her death, always poignant in itself, assumes the weight of an alarming metaphor. It all packed a punch indeed.

To be sure, part of this "punch" was the two compelling young artists who took the leads. From the moment Mimi entered, soprano Rebecca Goulden caught the essence of not just this frail and sickly creature, but also of a young girl on the run, frightened and vulnerable. Hers was a mesmerizing performance, secure vocally and wrenching in expressive nuance. The fast-rising, vibrant tenor Noah Stewart, was equally compelling (as he had been in a very different role, that of the greedy Augustus Gloop in *The Golden Ticket*.) Their performances, plus those of the committed cast, and many deft dramatic touches from the director, made for an enthralling afternoon of music drama. I missed much less than I thought I would the clipping of such colorful (and tangential) material as an angry landlord, children's marches, and the like.

Both *La Bohème* and *La Serva Padrona* were presented in the original Italian, and each made their impact without the aid of sur titles. Credit belongs to the intimate nature of the performances but also to the director and performers themselves that articulated with such clarity the essence of each work. I talked with a number of people in both audiences who commented they come to Wexford, often from a considerable distance, just to attend these "Short Works" – be they reduced versions of major works or one-act works in themselves. This must be a double-edged blade for the Company, attracting audiences, which they might also want to attend the main stage (and more expensive) offerings. But the bottom line is this: there's room both. It's wonderful indeed to have Wexford Festival Opera back in full swing. Let's hope in the face of difficult economic times, it can stay there.

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Noah Stewart and Rebecca Goulden in *La Bohème* Photo: Clive Bardo