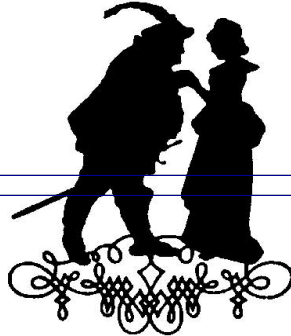


Opera con Brio

Winter 2012
Richard B. Beams



Wexford Festival Opera: A Winning Season in Fall 2011

A Season to Savor

I know of no other festival or venue quite like Wexford Festival Opera with its always-interesting combination of Short Works, Lunchtime Recitals and other concerts complementing its three main-stage operas. And few other festivals are so consistently successful at what they do. This year at Wexford, now celebrating its sixtieth season, was no exception. Especially fine were its three rarely performed operas, which, coupled with the homey charm and hospitality of picturesque Wexford itself, made the 2011 season one to savor.

In the Italian *bel canto* tradition was Donizetti's *opera buffa* of 1839, *Gianni di Parigi*, perhaps the least known of the sixteen operas by Donizetti Wexford has presented over the years. (The opera was not revived in contemporary times until 1988 in Bergamo, Donizetti's home town; a second revival came only in 2009 at the Valle d'Istria Festival in Martina Franca, with a production that Wexford borrowed this year.) In the *opéra comique* tradition was the charming *La Cour de Célimène* by Ambroise Thomas, evidently receiving its first performance since its premiere in 1855. Most rare of all, in the less populated tradition of Polish Romantic serious opera, about which few outside Poland know anything, was Roman Statkowski's dramatic *Maria* of 1906, a powerful foil to the two lighter offerings. Happily, the realization of this unfamiliar trio of works was as successful as the choice was enticing.



Rafal Bartminski as Waclaw and Daria Masiero as Maria
Photo: Clive Barda

A Powerful *Maria*

The revelation was *Maria*, in part because one knew least what to expect. Having listened to the recent Polskie Radio recording of the opera (2008), and having taught the work to an *Opera con Brio* group soon to attend the performance with me, I was at least familiar with the music, full of melodic invention, descriptive orchestral preludes and dances, rousing choruses, and a wealth of motivic material woven into rapturous threads. Thus the surprise in performance was not the music. With loving hands, the young conductor from Krakow, Tomasz Tokarczyk, led an idiomatic performance by orchestra and chorus, fully realizing the potential of this sumptuous score.

The surprise was the provocative sweep of the whole in the compelling update of the work by the creative production team at Wexford, led by Polish-born director Michael Gieleta and designer Andrzej Goulding. This was unexpected from an opera (whose libretto I had never seen) taken from an 1825 Romantic poem called *Marya* by Antoni Malczewski. The simple yet somber Ukrainian tale, although centering around the title character, essentially involves the conflict between a father and son. Count Palatine would prefer that his son, Waclaw, not marry the daughter of a mere regional governor. The Count thus sends Waclaw off to war in order to facilitate his plan to have Maria killed. Upon learning of his father's heinous crime, Waclaw first threatens to kill his

father, but instead takes his own life. Shades of nineteenth century Romantic melodrama indeed, like Verdi's *Luisa Miller*, and an effective vehicle in itself for the Romantic thrust of Statkowski's rapturous music.

But the production team made it much more than mere Romantic melodrama. In one of the most successful updates I have encountered, they moved the story from a seventeenth century conflict between the Tartars and the Ukrainian Poles to the twentieth century struggle between pro-democracy forces (Glasnost/Solidarity) and Communists. The Count becomes a high-ranking member of a Communist apparatus; the District Governor (Maria's father), a Solidarity activist, heads the Gdansk shipyards. Many video projections and films brought the disturbing struggle to life, so much so that the Polish ambassador to Ireland, who attended the opera and was active in the uprising, felt it was too soon for such a production to make its way back to Poland, so raw were the emotions still.



Rafal Bartminski as Waclaw rallies the rebels Photo: Clive Barda

In the intimate Wexford Opera House, with its rich and bright sound, the emotional resonance at the end was powerful indeed. Statkowski's music soars in glowing Romantic fashion à la Tchaikovsky as Waclaw turns the murderous blade on himself rather than on his father. "Oh my Maria, poor victim of man's pride, I do not wish to live without you, to a better world I depart." The music swells further as the people of Poland come silently forward, overpowering the hypocritical, but grief-stricken Count, alone in his sterile office. Like the rebels of Solidarity with a vision of a better world, they raise their fingers forming the victory V, trampling out for good the last remnants of the apparatchik's office and the suffocating regime.

It was a gripping close - a true apotheosis. Effectively capping the work, the final scene also provided a release from the omnipresent bleakness on stage: the dreary factory yard as setting for Maria and her father; unfinished construction projects; and grainy black and white film sequences, including projections of recurring snowstorms. Preceding the final scene, one such blinding storm depicted Waclaw's fury as he headed to confront his father, accompanied by descriptive music reminiscent in rhythm to the finale of Haydn's G minor quartet the "Rider." Statkowski's score itself is not bogged down with Wagnerian psychological probing; rather it often employs this kind of descriptive writing that moves action swiftly forward, much to the



Pro-democracy forces pray together in *Maria* Photo: Clive Barda

advantage of this production. At the close of *Maria*, like the C Major burst of light that signals escape from chaos in Haydn's *Creation*, the final apotheosis overwhelmed a stunned audience.

Additionally, exceptional musical forces were on hand under the direction of Maestro Tokarczyk who well deserved the tumultuous reception he received at both performances I attended. The cast was stellar: the full-voiced Verdian soprano Dana Masiero in the title role; the tall and handsome young Polish tenor Rafal Bartminski as Waclaw, with a ringing Vickers-like top register and an innate musicality at all levels. Both baritone Krzysztof Szumanski and bass Adam Kruszewski brought solid voices and idiomatic Polish nuance to their respective roles as the Count and the Governor. Soprano Eleanor Jean Greenwood nicely highlighted the important cameo role of the Waif in a role modeled after the simpleton in Boris Godunov, but aptly spectral in this production.

If large houses like the Met can do Mussorgsky's great opera, they ought to be able to mount Statkowski's masterful *Maria*. Even without the imaginative production it received in Wexford, this opera would certainly have held the stage well. It is simply a great work, worthy indeed of finding its way through the larger houses of the world. Let's hope it does soon. Meanwhile, thanks to Wexford Festival Opera for opening our eyes to this hidden treasure.

In a Lighter Vein

The other two main-stage presentations at Wexford, *La Cour de Célémène* and *Gianni di Parigi*, if less imposing, were no less successful. Each was given a frothy airing in which shades of Rossini, in one way or another, seemed to permeate - in the delightful scores as well as in the quick-paced, even cartoonish productions. If Thomas's effervescent *opéra comique* came off as perhaps the more inspired work, that's because, truth be told, it is. While Donizetti's comic work is an interesting offshoot of his writing for Naples in the 1820's, in years in which he was still finding his voice, so to speak, Thomas's work came at mid career, in 1855, when he was actively writing for the Opéra-Comique in Paris. (His more familiar serious works, *Mignon* and *Hamlet* were yet a decade away.)

Whatever the case, credit goes to Wexford Opera simply for choosing these rarities, one a neglected jewel honoring the bicentennial year of Thomas's birth, the other an intriguing curiosity honoring one of the most masterful, prolific, and popular of Italian opera composers.



Claudia Boyle as Célimène surrounded by her many suitors

A Charming *La Cour de Célimène*

As was the case with *Maria*, a recent excellent recording, on Opera Rara, had well acquainted me with the score of this bubbling *opéra comique*. Once again, hearing the piece on stage, particularly in this charming production, was a revelation. Much credit belongs to the conductor, Carlos Izcaray, returning to Wexford after his successful debut in Wexford the previous year. The virtuosic woodwind writing, already evident from the recording, positively sparkled in live performance, from the prelude right through the entire evening.

The comic pace of the opera rarely lets up. How many operas can one name with a protagonist who has no fewer than fourteen suitors? Twelve of them are the “cour,” the court of Célimène - four elderly (basses), four middle aged (tenors), and four young (mezzos) - who make rapid-fire entrances in the first scene even popping up from below the tiled floor. The other two protagonists come from the *Commedia dell’Arte* tradition; the impetuous lover and the braggart

soldier are respectively The Chevalier (tenor) and The Commander (bass). The Princess herself (Célimène), steps right out of Moliere’s *The Misanthrope*. She is an insatiable coquette who does nothing but play on men’s affections. The pun on “cour” tells all: her heart (*coeur*) is hard, unlike that of each in the “cour,” her court. Only Célimène’s sister, the Baroness, will discover genuine affection.

Soprano Nathalie Paulin as the Baroness had all the gentle warmth of expression appropriate to the more sympathetic sister, and indeed she admirably displayed this same quality of warmth and careful attention to text in her “French Salon” Lunchtime Recital a few days later. And the two principal suitors - nicely idiomatic lyric tenor Luigi Boccia and the more boisterous Irish bass John Molloy - effectively captured the spirit of the two frustrated suitors. Yet it was the brilliant coloratura soprano Claudia Boyle who stole the show. Her spectacular entrance helped; dangling from a seat supported by ropes of flowers, she descended, clad in an elegant gown and sporting a foot-high seventeenth century wig, to a stage raked heavily from right to left. All is a little out of kilter, as a sloped gold frame around the stage also suggests. But it was really the breathtaking flow of golden *fioratura* from this talented and strikingly attractive young singer that set the performance on edge.

Hers was indeed a commanding and brilliant performance. In her Lunchtime Recital, she masterfully displayed her diversity of talent, in pieces from works as far ranging as Mozart’s *Stabat Mater* and Verdi’s *La Traviata*. Still, it was the impeccable precision and dazzle in Mozart’s famous Queen of the Night aria from *The Magic Flute* that took center stage in the concert, just as her rendition of Célimène’s second act aria and cabaletta did in the opera. Her credits include the fiendishly difficult role of Konstanza in *Die Entführung aus dem Serail*, which she will repeat this spring in Berlin; she also understudied the role of Inez in Mercadante’s *I due Figaro* at the Whitsun Festival in Salzburg last June with Riccardo Muti. Later this year she will sing the role again under Maestro Muti in both Madrid and at the famed Teatro Colón. Happily, I will have the good fortune to be in Berlin, and a group from Opera con Brio will join me later in Argentina. Lucky us – this is clearly a great talent on the rise!



Claudia Boyle as Célimène
Photo: Clive Barda



Claudia Boyle, Célimène; John Molloy, the Commander; Nathalie Paulin, the Baroness
Photo: Clive Barda

A Buoyant *Gianni di Parigi*

But one need not necessarily go to opera houses in Berlin or Argentina to hear rising singers. Talent abounded again in Wexford's third offering of the season, Donizetti's *Gianni di Parigi*, in which a young, unknown Uruguayan tenor, Edgardo Rocha, was impressive in the title role of that opera. His was a daunting task, singing a role tailored for the great Italian tenor and Bellini specialist Giovanni Battista Rubini (who in fact never sang the work). Like Rubini, this young tenor also appeared capable of singing into the stratosphere (as he did in the notoriously difficult aria written for Arturo in *I Puritani* presented as part his own Lunchtime Recital.) His thin but attractive tone will hopefully mature well. Opposite him, as the Princess who Gianni has promised to wed, was another young talent, the attractive Czech soprano Zuzana Markova. She too has all the high notes, with effortless coloratura wonderfully displayed in the ornamentation of the cabaletta repeats. She is yet another rising artist to heed in the future.



Lucia Cirillo, the Page
Photo: Clive Barda

However, it was not merely the fine artistry of this talented pair that carried the show. Other highlights included the promising mezzo-soprano Lucia Cirillo, in the trouser role of Gianni's page, who wowed the audience with her deep, distinctive voice in the famous ballad "Mira, o bella, il trovatore" sung for the count's dinner party. And the fine pair of buffo bases, Alessandro Spina as the innkeeper Pedrigo, along with Alessandro Luongo as the Princess's pompous steward, the Gran Siniscalco, provided another showstopper with their bravura buffo duet, indeed anticipating one to come a decade later in *Don Pasquale*.

The plot, by one of the best librettists of the era, Felice Romani, is certainly spare, merely a plan by the Dauphin, in the guise of Gianni di Parigi, at an Inn he has taken over, to check out his bride to be, Princess Bianca of Navarre. She's on to him, however ("Wit Outwitted" Donizetti specialist Jeremy Commons aptly labels his article in the program book). And, after ample posing and posturing, the high point of the opera is certainly the lengthy love duet when the two happily come together.



Zuzana Markova, Bianca
Photo: Clive Barda

By Donizetti standards, *Gianni di Parigi* is a relatively insubstantial work - with hints, but not the polish, of such later masterpieces as the *Elisir d'Amore* or *Don Pasquale*. The *tinta* is of the more generic Neapolitan operas of the 1820's. But the sure hand of a master craftsman is evident - in the ensemble work, in the unending melodic flare, and in the vibrancy of the orchestral pallet. All these elements contributed to the evening's success, especially with the spirited conducting of Giacomo Sagripanti. The comic pacing by director Federico Grazzini also helped, with much apt



Edgardo Rocha, Gianni Photo: Clive Barda

mugging and eavesdropping by the chorus and others, appropriate for the mostly farcical context. The set from Martina Franca, the Inn's Art Nouveau exterior, provided an appropriate frame for the lively action. It was a delightful and entertaining evening in the theater. While this slight opera is no masterpiece, it was worthy of revival. Thanks to Wexford for exploring this little corner of the vast Donizetti universe.



The Cast and Set of *Gianni di Parigi* Photo: Clive Barda

Looking Ahead

And so it was a season to cherish. Happily, Wexford Festival Opera will continue to live up to its mission of staging rarely performed or unjustly neglected operas in the 2012 season with three works, again diverse in genre and language. One is another *opéra comique*, Emmanuel Chabrier's *Le Roi Malgre Lui (The King in Spite of Himself)* of 1887, an unjustly neglected masterpiece with a brilliant score, often reminiscent of Berlioz. Another is Frederick Delius' *A Village Romeo and Juliet* of 1907, a poignant "lyric drama in six pictures." The third is Francesco Cilea's richly lyric *L'Arlesiana (The Girl from Arles)* of 1897, an early success for the young Enrico Caruso.

Initially Wexford had hoped to produce Mercadante's *Francesca da Rimini* of 1831 – which in fact had never ever been performed, since the opera house for which it was written burned to the ground before the would-be premiere. Talk about rare! However, a recent press release announced, "attempts by Wexford Festival Opera to have a critical performing edition of the manuscript published in time for the 2012 Festival became fraught with unanticipated difficulties and forced us to change our plans." No matter. Wexford Festival Opera will once again heed the admonition of founder Tom Walsh to give the public "not what it knew and liked but what it might come to like." Let's hope they do it next year as well as they did this year. Bets are they will.

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Wexford Harbor



The Entrance to the Wexford Opera House



The Interior of the Wexford Opera House