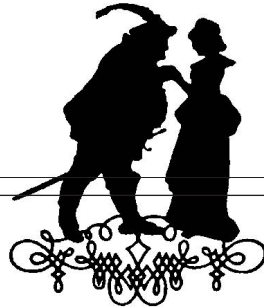


Opera con Brio

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Boston Lyric Opera Triumphs with *La Cenerentola* Fall 2023

La Cenerentola ossia La bontà in Trionfo (*Cinderella or Goodness Triumphant*) by Gioachino Rossini was at first not much of a success when it premiered in Rome in 1817. But according to the opera's librettist Jacopo Ferretti, Rossini, who had conducted the premiere and was a bit miffed at its initial failure, was not worried, predicting that "it will be very popular in Rome before the end of the season, in the whole of Italy at the end of the year, and in France and England within two years. Impresarios and, still more, prima donnas, will end by fighting for it." Rossini was basically correct, as anyone will attest who attended the Boston Lyric Opera's captivating production on November 8, 10 or 12 at the Emerson Cutler Majestic Theatre. Even now, some two hundred years later, *La Cenerentola* is deserving of its rightful place as one of the most delightful comic operas in the entire repertoire.

To those familiar only with Charles Perrault's original *Cinderella*, Ferretti and Rossini's version may come as somewhat of a surprise. After all, all the elements that delight in the original fairy tale are gone: the fairy godmother, the pumpkin, the coach, the magic transformations, the Prince's ball, the midnight chimes, and even the glass slipper. The fairy godmother becomes a much more practical tutor to the Prince; the famous slipper becomes an even more practical bracelet. *La Cenerentola* is not a fairy-tale opera, but a *melodramma giocoso* in two acts firmly rooted in the world of Neapolitan *opera buffa*. As the lively BLO production illustrated, all the magic and charm of the work is in the music - and the fast-moving production was a delight from beginning to end, with music-making of the highest order by a talented cast and orchestra led by the nuanced conducting of David Agnus.

Certainly, a great boon to the performance was the innovative production itself, embracing the non-fairy-tale flavor of the piece by placing it in present-day Boston. Updating in opera becomes its nemesis sometimes, but in this case, the shift was a perfect match. As the BLO program notes explain:

Our Cinderella, Angelina, lives with her stepfather (Don Magnifico) and stepsisters (Clorinda and Tisbe) in the Seaport in a brand-new, sparkling glass high-rise condominium. While Angelina is forced to act as their (unpaid) housekeeper, the stepsisters spend their days as social media influencers, desperate to get “in” with the older, more established wealthy Boston families, like Ramiro’s [alias the “Prince”]. Magnifico encourages their behavior, hoping it will remedy the fact that they are living beyond their means. In contrast to Don Magnifico’s Seaport residence, Ramiro’s family home in Beacon Hill is a warm old brick house covered in ivy, complete with beautiful secluded courtyard. Romance blossoms in this courtyard when Angelina and Ramiro meet for a second time, and this is where Angelina ultimately makes her home with Ramiro, the person who sees her for who she is.

Fairy tale or not, goodness is triumphant, and forgiveness abounds at the final curtain. And details of Ferretti’s masterful libretto often play nicely into the transposition, right from the opening stage direction placing the two locations of the opera not far apart from one another as in the original. And Boston-based Set Designer Jenna McFarland caught the modern essence of the two locations, with a “less-is-more” opening set with stairs to a second level, to which the dutiful



Alexis Peart as Tisbe; and Dana Lynne Varga as Clorinda
Photo: Nile Scott Studios

house-cleaning Angelina often retreated, and later with a shift to Ramiro’s nearby elegant Beacon Hill pad with ivy-covered brick pillars to either side, and a secluded garden. Elsewhere, the updating with endless “selfies” reinforces the pomposity of Magnifico and his two self-absorbed daughters. Indeed, a myriad of details from experienced Boston-based stage director Dawn M. Simmons captured the nuance of emotional shifts pervading the ensemble-rich score – a shrug here, an alluring leg there. And no one in the audience will forget the glance of perplexed glee from Angelina following her first encounter with Ramiro.

As for the opera itself, *La Cenerentola* contains perhaps some of the most demanding vocal music Rossini ever wrote, for a cast of seven singers who must be secure in virtuoso vocal technique. The BLO certainly had such a group, headed by the beguiling mezzo-soprano Cecelia Hall, making her role and house debut. From the start with her delightfully tentative canzona, to the finish with her virtuosic rondo finale, she displayed all the expressiveness and flexibility of voice that made her the perfect embodiment of this rags-to-riches heroine. Along the way, if her



Cecelia Hall as Angelina

Photo: Nile Scott Studios

impeccable wide-ranging runs may have lacked the rich, velvety lowest register of a contralto, such soaring vocal lines as “Questo è proprio una strapasso!” (“I must work without an ending”) sung early on amidst the buffo declamations of her sisters, cast a radiant warmth over ensembles like this. Indeed, her fundamental humanity always shone through. Since Angelina is the innocent victim of both her stepfather and stepsisters in this comedy with dark edges, her role calls for more nuance than the mere effervescence of Rossina, the sparkling protagonist in *The Barber of Seville* (composed just the preceding year.) This nuance Ms. Hall delivered consistently.

As for the prince, Ramiro is a straightforward and earnest hero also more in the *serioso* mode. The young South African tenor Levy Sekgapane sang the role with ardent sincerity and clarion *fiatura*, making Ramiro the ideal mate for Angelina. As they first meet and begin to fall in love, their tentative duettino was a delight with its ebb and flow of hushed imitative phrases. And Ramiro too has some of Rossini’s most virtuosic vocal writing. Indeed, he almost stole the show with his virtuoso aria in Act II, determined to find the enchanting owner of the lost bracelet, “Si, ritrovarla io guiro” (“Yes, I shall find her”).

Many years ago, in 1996, I was fortunate to be at the Rossini Opera Festival in Pesaro, Italy when a young Peruvian tenor, Juan Diego Flórez, stole the show with a sensational last-minute debut in the modern-day revival of *Matilda di Shabran* (a later *opera semi-seria* by Rossini). A few years later in 2002 at the Met, I recall he made a comparable sensation with this aria in what the New York Times critic Anne Midgette called “a clear, cool voice” with “shining, glorious high notes.” The same might be said of Mr. Sekgapane who with his light, high voice sang with vitality and bright tone throughout his range, including some pinpoint high C’s. Indeed, he has already established himself with both this role and that of Almavia in *The Barber of Seville*. Rossini aficionados take note!



Levy Sekgapane as Prince Don Ramiro Photo: Nile Scott Studios

All this is not to say the effervescent comic element was ignored. Far from it. Nor in this artfully updated production were the psychological subtleties ignored in the four basically buffo characters, Don Magnifico and his two daughters, and Don Ramiro’s valet, Dandini. The vain and silly daughters, soprano Dana Lynne Varga and mezzo Alexis Peart, were more than just farcical stereotypes. Although dressed gaudily by Costume Designer Trevor Bowen with bright pink, purple, violet and orange hues, they never let



Brandon Cedel as Don Magnifico; Alexis Peart as Tisbe; and Dana Lynne Varga as Clorinda Photo: Nile Scott Studios

go of their social climbing agenda, nor their disdain for their stepsister, Angelica. Both – Ms. Varga, an experienced voice teacher and coach, and Ms. Peart, a vibrant Emerging Artist - sang with impressive flair, important contributors in the fast-moving multifaceted ensembles, as secure too in the rapid-fire virtuosic vocal demands as the lead protagonists.

The other dynamic duo, two comic characters in the great Italian tradition, were baritone Levi Hernandez as a flamboyant Dandini and bass-baritone Brandon Cedel as a pompous, and sometimes over-the-top, Don Magnifico. They were irresistible, alone or together. Mr. Hernandez, sometimes solemn when



Levi Hernandez as Dandini posing as the Prince
Photo: Nile Scott Studios

posing as Ramiro, sometimes bursting with laughter as Dandini, was the perfect embodiment of this appealing character. And Mr. Cedel, for whom Rossini provides solo numbers as ostentatious as his showy outfits, gets more of a chance to display his considerable expertise as a buffo bass. Foremost among these was his entrance aria, “Miei rampolli femminini” scolding his daughters for interrupting his dream – which in turn exposes him as he really is, a puffed-up ass. But the captivating gem for the two of them comes with their superb Duet in Act II, “Un segreto d’importanza,” which Rossini scholar Philip Gossett rightly calls “one of the finest buffo numbers in the entire repertory.” Isolated in front of the curtain, Magnifico sprawls on the floor as though still in a dream, only to have his bubble burst when Dandini reveals his awful secret – he’s no prince, just a poor valet. The two masters of the buffo idiom made this a comic highlight of the evening, just as it should be.

One other bass is critical to the opera, James Demler as the transmogrified “fairy godmother,” here Don Ramiro’s trusted tutor Alidoro. His entrance is in the comic vein,



James Demler as Alidoro
Photo: Nile Scott Studios

as a delivery man bringing items for the two sisters ordered online. The stepsisters treat him with disdain, but Angelina kindly offers him a refreshing treat (coffee and dunkin’ donuts!). But by the end, we see Alidoro in the serious vein, pleased with the just and happy outcome. He expresses his satisfaction from a box to the left of the audience, the male chorus, excellent throughout the night, echoing his sentiments from the aisles. My only wish is that this expressive bass had been given more to sing, as is sometimes the case.



Cecelia Hall as Angelina

Photo: Nile Scott Studios

At any rate, all resolves with Angelina's dazzling rondo finale set in Ramiro's courtyard. With the pair now in elegant white attire for their wedding, Angelina forgives and embraces her chastened stepsisters and father. The protagonists share hugs and kisses all around and all join in for the joyous celebration of the triumph of goodness and forgiveness in BLO's carefully updated production. Rossini would have been delighted.

Coda

Certainly Rossini's predictions about *La Cenerentola* have proved prescient; the famous prima donna of Rossini's day, Maria Malibran at age 17, created a sensation as Angelina in the first American performance in New York in 1829, and the opera continued to have great success during the 19th century. In the first part of the 20th century, performances were scarce, but with the advent of the Rossini renaissance after the Second World War, *La Cenerentola* established itself triumphantly, both at home and abroad. Notably, Italy's famed Teatro alla Scala, in its first ever visit to the

United States in the fall of 1976, to celebrate America's Bicentennial at the Kennedy Center in Washington, included *La Cenerentola* as the only Rossini opera among its three Verdi offerings (*Macbeth*, *Simon Boccanegra*, and his *Messa di Requiem*) along with Puccini's evergreen *La Bohème*. Two famous mezzos of the day, one American, Frederica von Stade, and one Italian, Lucia Valentini Terrani, alternated in the title role.

In the fall of 1991, on the eve of the Rossini Bicentennial in 1992, Boston Lyric Opera did its share by presenting its first ever *La Cenerentola*, also at The Emerson Majestic, conducted by Stephen Lord, with Mary Ann McCormick and Jeffrey Francis aptly handling the two leads. The televised Bicentennial Celebration of Rossini's birth followed a couple months later from Lincoln Center. The host for the program was musicologist Phillip Gossett with duties shared by the two artists without whom the expanded Rossini renaissance would not have been possible, tenor Rockwell (Rocky) Blake, and mezzo-soprano Marilyn Horne. Surprisingly, the first ever *La Cenerentola* at the Metropolitan Opera was not until fall of 1997, at a Gala for Cecilia Bartoli who, as New York Times critic Anthony Tommasini wrote, gave a "lesson in voice projection" with her "crisp and focused rhythmic execution."

The same could certainly be said of Cecelia Hall's captivating performance in Boston, as she led the excellent cast in BLO's fine production of *La Cenerentola*, a production which encapsulated all the qualities that have caused the renaissance of Rossini's 39 operas to prevail.