

Opera con Brio

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Rossini's Masterful *Ermione* Finally Sees the Light of Day in D.C.

At the 1987 Rossini Opera Festival in Pesaro, Italy, Rossini's hometown, I attended the first modern staging of *Ermione* in the 168 years since its disastrous premiere at the Teatro San Carlo in 1819 when it was withdrawn after a single performance. Rossini, nonplused by the reception, knew the worth of this taut, tragic opera for which he himself had prepared a text derived from Racine's *Andromaque*. Indeed, later in life he quipped, "it is my little *Guillaume Tell*, in Italian, and it will not see the light of day until after my death." How right he was.

Soon after the revival in Pesaro, an explosion of performances across the operatic globe ensued. Among these, in June of the 1992 Rossini Bicentennial came the American concert premiere in San Francisco, followed

shortly that fall by the American staged premiere at Opera Omaha (and the production by Jonathan Miller was then repeated a decade later at Santa Fe Opera); in 1995 the renowned Glyndebourne Festival Opera staged the work, its first ever *opera seria* by Rossini; and about a decade later it appeared in New York, not at the Met, but across the plaza at the then more adventurous New York City Opera.

Thus, it is rightly with considerable pride and fanfare that just down the highway, on December 2nd of 2023, the equally adventurous Washington Concert Opera unveiled its performance of this extraordinary work. The opening line to Peter Russell's informative essay in the WCO program book ("A Priceless 'Missing Link' Rediscovered")

calls attention to “...the welcome presence of Gioachino Rossini’s *Ermione* in our nation’s capital tonight for an overdue area debut.” With a fine cast, including some of the best Rossini singers out there today, Antony Walker, WCO Artistic Director and Conductor, led a vibrant performance that came close to capturing the virtuosic demands of this elusive work, falling short only in the tricky problem of bringing the dramatic, daringly through-composed work to a satisfactorily realization in a concert performance.

This cast included the animated mezzo-soprano Ginger Costa-Jackson as the beleaguered Andromaca, faithful to the dead Trojan hero Hector in the face of the infatuation of King Pirro of Epirus, son of Achilles. At the outset of the opera Ms. Costa-Jackson turned the comparatively small but important role into a dramatic spark to the whole night with her affecting maternal tribute to her young son (Astianatte) followed in this double aria with



David Portillo as Pirro

Photo: Caitlin Oldham

a stinging cabaletta rejecting the suit of Pirro. As for the self-righteous King, David Portillo fully met the demands of a heroic coloratura tenor right from the start. Notable was his grand three-part aria before the Finale of Act I displaying all the ease of high tessitura and virtuosity needed to address in turn the visiting Oreste, then Andromaca with mellifluous legato lines, and finally Ermione, his betrothed, with a robust display of vocal prowess.

A second tenor, the esteemed Rossini specialist Lawrence Brownlee, was equally persuasive in his role-debut as Oreste, the visiting Greek who seeks the death of the young son of Andromaca and Hector (Astianatte) to keep this son from avenging Hector’s death by the Greeks. Oreste, while fleeing the furies for his own past deeds, is also smitten with an insatiable passion for Ermione who eventually persuades him to enact vengeance on Pirro. In his stirring *scena e cavatina* in Act I (famous out of context as a concert piece for tenor), Mr. Brownlee embodied all the impetuosity and



Ginger Costa-Jackson as Andromaca Photo: Caitlin Oldham



Lawrence Brownlee as Oreste

Photo: Caitlin Oldham

guile Rossini suggested in his far-ranging notes. We were left with no doubt that as the opera proceeded, he would become angry enough to do Ermione's bidding.

In sum, the three singers, one mezzo and two tenors, so well schooled in the service of Rossini's varied demands, brought to mind the three who preceded them at the Pesaro revival, Marilyn Horne, Chris Merritt, and Rockwell Blake – all instrumental in fostering the lasting Rossini renaissance. At that landmark revival, renowned bel canto soprano Montserrat Caballé had bravely assumed the demanding, many-sided role of Ermione. With all due respect for this artist of great subtlety and refinement, who certainly embodied the stature of this tormented titular character, she also rather blurred the myriad rapid-fire notes of the score for which the meticulous musicologist Philip Gossett (1941-2017) had supplied the new critical edition. Dr. Gossett later wrote in his book *Divas and Scholars* of the “egregiously underprepared prima

donna” of the Pesaro premiere. A few years later, I had the good fortune to be sitting with Dr. Gossett at the American premiere in Omaha of *Ermione* in which soprano Brenda Harris sang the role exactly as written, with great aplomb. At the intermission, walking with him up the aisle, I still recall how with a child-like glee he mumbled over and over, “she sang all the notes, she sang all the notes!”

Indeed Washington Concert Opera also had a familiar and esteemed soprano, Angela Meade, to take on a role for which she had garnered much experience, having triumphed in numerous productions worldwide. She was certainly well prepared and, although I didn't count them, she certainly sang all the notes. Yet over all, I found her take on Ermione disappointing. To be sure, I have had great admiration for this lyric soprano, with her warm, vibrant voice ever since I first encountered her in her Met debut in 2008 (in *Ernani*), then a surprise *Anna Bolena* in the same year at the Academy of Vocal Arts in Philadelphia, and



Angela Meade as Ermione

Photo: Caitlin Oldham

as recently as this fall in another Verdi role, Amelia in *Un Ballo in Maschere*. The problem for me with her Ermione, however, was the lack of commensurate dramatic verisimilitude needed to accompany all these notes.

The short second act of the opera's two acts largely gives way to an in-depth study of Ermione's fragile state of mind and manic behavior. In her extended *gran scena*, her mood shifts radically in just a few bars, with Armida-like emotional swings, from rage to self-pity and love. All this demands not just all the notes prescribed, but nuanced singing with subtle shifts in everything from timbre to phrasing, which Ms. Meade provided, but only to a moderate, relatively unconvincing degree, lacking the commensurate fire and brio necessary to convey the radical shifts of emotional turmoil. It is unfair to think what Callas might have done with Ermione (as she had done famously with Rossini's Armida), but the lack of requisite veracity in Ms. Meade's Ermione made for a relatively unconvincing portrayal, hampering what should have been a riveting scene with her ensuing final confrontation with Oreste.

As is often pointed out, the opera's musical structures are monumental. The expansive first act, a magnificent seven-movement structure beginning with Rossini's unorthodox overture in which an offstage male chorus laments the fate of Troy, paves the way for the drama that soon unfolds. The taut four-movement structure of the second act then focuses primarily on Ermione, broken only by a brief duettino for yet a third fine tenor, Matthew Hill and bass-

baritone Matthew Scollin, as the two friends, Pilade and Fenicio, predict the trouble ahead, a calculated break in the intensifying drama. In this carefully crafted opera, what Rossini wrote was not just entertainment, but music drama much ahead of its time. Typically, an aria or duet, rather than being an end in itself, becomes a building block in a larger scene.

Thus, a minor objection I also had to this overall fine concert performance was how often conductor Antony Walker encouraged applause points, however well-deserved, where none should have broken the "building block" of this almost through-composed music drama. I realize this is debatable, especially considering the point Mr. Walker made some years ago about the special nature of concert opera:

We have a slogan: 'It's all about the music.' It is not an either-or thing. It's a different way of seeing, experiencing, and hearing opera.... In a way, you 'see' a different sort of opera. It's much more intimate. And as a conductor, you're much more exposed. You're a part of everything in a way that everyone can see.

Admirably, the music making of this performance of *Ermione* was first rate per usual for WCO, with the refined precision of the orchestra giving the singers their rightful place to shine without the varied antics of staging to distract; the intimacy was indeed engaging and compelling. Yet the special demands of this particular opera should perhaps have been taken more into account. A critic for London's

magazine *Opera*, Richard Osborne, wrote of the Pesaro premiere, *Ermione* emerges as a work,

...where the famous Rossinian energy, driving inwards, defines tragic obsession and where Rossini's growing concern with dramatic verisimilitude within the context of radically evolving forms was enough to wipe the smiles off the faces of the sybarites and dilettantes.

While periodic applause points are certainly welcome and proper appreciation for fine singing, a better sense of the music drama at hand, perhaps something difficult to achieve

in a concert performance, would have given a more complete sense of the accumulating tension and power of this magnificent work.

That said, if the parts were generally better than the whole, with so much fine singing and the idiomatic and refined orchestral performance, there was much to savor in this long-delayed Washington premiere. All considered, Washington Concert Opera, inspired by the leadership of Artistic Director Antony Walker, deserves considerable credit for its commitment to help such rarely performed *bel canto* works "see the light of day." I hope WCO will continue in this admirable commitment.



Antony Walker, WCO Artistic Director and Conductor, leads the Cast, Orchestra and Chorus of *Ermione*

Photo: Caitlin Oldham