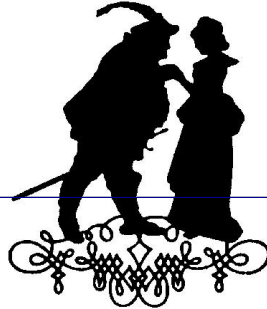


Opera con Brio



Otello and *The Raven*, Two Haunting Descents into Despair Opera Philadelphia's Riveting Festival O22

Performing for the first time since 2019 following the pandemic pause, Opera Philadelphia's always enterprising Festival 0 returned full throttle with two diverse and mesmerizing productions: one, the main stage offering at the historic Academy of Music, Rossini's infrequently performed and vocally demanding *Otello* of 1816; the other, at the neighboring Miller Theatre, contemporary Japanese composer Toshio Hosokawa's monodrama for mezzo soprano and chamber orchestra, *The Raven*. Each has its roots in famous literary sources: the first, loosely on Shakespeare's tragedy *Othello*, the second, Poe's haunting mid-19th century poem, used directly for the libretto. But while the respective idioms are far apart - one a quintessential *ottocento* Italian opera, with its demanding vocalism, the other a distinctly Japanese musical landscape - uncanny parallels exist in the narrative thrust of the two works. Basically, each follows the descent of a single tormented mezzosoprano into

despair. In the end, Festival O22 made a compelling case for the power and dramatic viability of both works with its captivating productions.

Otello

The best way to prepare for an evening with Rossini's thrilling *Otello* is to put aside Verdi's masterpiece of some seven decades later, which eclipsed the popularity of Rossini's work - and for that matter, to put aside Shakespeare's *Othello* as well. With Rossini's version, as the eminent Rossini scholar Philip Gossett has pointed out, at least for the first two acts, spectators of the day,

...would have rightly perceived that the opera explores certain archetypal situations of contemporary Italian opera: a secret marriage between a military hero and a young woman's disapproving father who wishes his daughter to wed another; a scheming confidante; a duel between the rivals; a father's curse; and on through a range of



The Cast and set of Rossini's *Otello* at Opera Philadelphia
Photo: Steven Pisano

familiar melodramatic formulas. Only in the third act, with the scene for Desdemona and Emilia and the final confrontation and tragedy, would the literary source have become apparent.

Within this context, Francesco Maria Berio, Marchese di Salsa, a distinguished literary figure of Naples, created a serviceable but logically structured libretto after Shakespeare for Rossini, well within the continental classical ideals of the day, where unities of time, setting, and action tightened the dramatic thrust of the plot. The austere production borrowed from Liege and directed by Emilio Sagi, served these unities well. All action takes place in a single grand 20th-century drawing room, complete with grand piano and furniture that gradually gets covered up. From the opening tableaux of military personnel toasting Otello's victorious return (while Rodrigo and Iago, seated in their tuxes make wry asides), the day moves on to Desdemona's famous "Willow Song" at the outset of the opera's tragic denouement. The monochromatic set, subtly lit by Eduardo Bravo, provided the increasingly claustrophobic frame for

the course of Desdemona's profound inner agonies with high glass floor-to-ceiling walls in the back, snow falling outside (yes, it snows in Venice) and a stairway at stage right ascending to a narrow balcony across the top.

Three virtuosic tenors

Perhaps one of the more unsettling aspects of the opera for contemporary listeners is that all three major male characters are tenors – and very different tenors at that. Another surprise would be the elevation of one of them, Rodrigo. Rather than the semi-comic fop and puppet to Iago in Shakespeare, Berio elevates Rodrigo to a driving force in the plot – indeed the most important character in the opera next to Desdemona and Otello. Rossini followed suit, writing for the star "tenore di grazia" (light, high, lyric tenor) of the day, Giovanni David, renowned for his agility and brilliant upper register and coloratura. And Philadelphia was fortunate to have experienced American tenor Lawrence Brownlee, today's foremost exponent of this archetypal Rossinian vocal type, debuting in the role of Rodrigo.



Lawrence Brownlee as Rodrigo Photo: Steven Pisano

For years, Rockwell Blake, an American tenor instrumental in the Rossini renaissance of last century, was without peer in this field as a Rossini specialist. Mr. Brownlee now holds this position. Indeed he stole the show in his great second-act *scena*, “Che Ascolto?” where, as wronged lover, he expressed with astounding conviction and panache, all the trademarks of this voice type, from gorgeous legato line to clarion coloratura with a glorious top (certainly either C# or D). Another thrilling highlight was the famous confrontation duet with Otello, also in Act II, “Ah vieni.”

As Otello, the young South African tenor Khanyiso Gwexane certainly held his own admirably in this, his U.S debut. Rossini’s original Otello was another virtuoso of the day, Andrea Nozzari, famous as a “Baritonal tenor” – agile and florid, needing all the top notes, but slightly weightier, often singing in the lower range. Complementing Blake in the Rossini Renaissance, Chris Merritt was the perfect embodiment of this type. So too Brownlee and Gwexane complemented each other in this duet, although Mr. Gwexane may have been a bit out-gunned by his more experienced opponent. Still, if his voice was a little light for the role, his pleasing tone and



Khanyiso Gwexane as Otello Photo: Steven Pisano

commanding persona, from the spacious “Introduzione e cavatina” opening the opera to the final *scena* with Desdemona, reflects a considerable talent ready to master the vocal demands of Rossini.



Alek Shrader as Iago and Khanyiso Gwexane as Otello
Photo: Steven Pisano

As for Iago, one has to put aside Verdi’s Mephistophelian manipulator of the plot and accept Berio’s far less monstrous persona, here another rival for Desdemona’s love. The third of Rossini’s three tenors at the Naples premiere was Giuseppe Ciccimara, an adequate local tenor with a lower tessitura (average pitch) than the other two, but still with considerable demands for agility. Another American tenor, Alek Schrader was perfect for the role. A compelling actor, he exploited the dark color of his voice as an especially effective complement to Otello (Khanyiso Gwexane). Rossini plays their voices off each other in their duet as Otello reads Desdemona’s *billet doux* (Berio’s substitution for the handkerchief) and Iago comments gleefully underneath.

Desdemona, a stunning central focus

In the program book, Director Emilio Sagi points to some of the ways in which Berio deviates in his libretto from Shakespeare:

He exchanges, among other things, Iago's motivation of envy and manipulation for that of an ill-fated love for Desdemona, who herself displays great psychological and dramatic strength in a world ruled by the men around her. Otello, Rodrigo, Iago, and even Elmiro [Desdemona's father] fight among themselves, disregarding Desdemona's feelings and pure intentions despite each, in some way, loving her.



Daniela Mack as Desdemona

Photo: Steven Pisano

This explanation goes a long way to illuminate Sagi's production itself, the cold, monochromatic veneer of the set, the presence on stage of clusters of heartless, macho men, oblivious not only to the needs of Desdemona but, it would seem, to the needs of women in general. Sagi explains more about his concept, which employs "...aristocratic figures and formalities of that time (the 20th century just after the first world war) to emphasize men's lack of scruples when deciding on the life and feelings of a woman: Desdemona." Indeed, at the center of the work amidst the web of three tenors stands Desdemona. Rossini, created the role for Isabella Colbran, eventually to become the heroine in all his great nine *opera serias* for Naples (and his wife also.) States Gossett, she was "one of the most strikingly imagined heroines of the ottocento."

The same could be said this century of the extraordinary mezzo Daniela Mack, whom I've encountered many times in stunning performances, most recently in two Handel roles, Dardano in Boston Baroque's *Amadigi*, and Amastre in *Serse*

with The English Concert in Carnegie Hall. In her debut portraying Desdemona's many fluctuating emotions as doomed spouse and disobedient daughter, she proved an eminent Rossinian, singing and acting with great vocal prowess and conviction. From her lovely Duetto with her maid Emilia, mezzo Sun-Ly Pierce "a wistful meditation on the pangs of love," to her vehement explosion closing the Aria Finale of Act II, following the curse by her implacable father Elmiro, bass-baritone Christian Pursell, she was simply outstanding.

A startling, unconventional close

But for me, the surprising coup of the production was what happened after the climax of Act II. In my many years of attending performances of *Otello* worldwide (in Venice, Pesaro, Chicago, San Francisco), there has always been an intermission at this point before Act III - a timely release from the accumulating tension of Act II. But not in Philadelphia. The disconsolate Desdemona, at the top of the balcony overlooking



Daniela Mack as Desdemona

Photo: Steven Pisano

the stage, tries to hurl herself over the railing, restrained only by two maids. No curtain. Instead, maestro Corrado Rovaris leads the orchestra immediately with his usual sensitivity into the gentle, bucolic prelude to Act III as Desdemona, shell-shocked, slowly descends the stairs. And soon we hear from afar perhaps one of the most seminal moments in the history of Italian opera, the gondolier singing Dante's famous lines "Nessun maggior dolore che ricordarsi del tempo felice nella miseria" ("There is no greater woe than to recall past bliss while in distress.")

I would not argue that this is the best way to perform the work. After all, the audience needs a break from the accumulating tension, and certainly the soprano needs a break as well to rest for the challenging scene ahead. But I must say it worked, sustaining this tension while also edging into the scene of haunting desolation that follows – not in her bedroom, but on the same set, chairs draped in covers, with the same grand piano. There a heartbroken Desdemona stands as the harp begins its plaintive introduction to her despairing "Willow Song." Ms. Mack, tireless through the four-stanza folk-like song, made this the unforgettable highlight

of the opera (which it should be). The final spare and unvarnished verse was mesmerizing in her soft, broken exchanges with the clarinet. As in Handel, her full, warm mezzo shows best against minimal orchestration. The final silence was haunting.

Never in the opera does Rossini give Desdemona a love duet with her husband, à la Verdi. A cold reticence defines their relationship as mirrored in the monochromatic production. So the final act then crescendos through the restored tension of their only duet, the furious "Non arrestar il colpo," to the horrendous final moment where the enraged estranged Otello kills his innocent wife, not by strangling her as in Shakespeare or Verdi but, as Berio also prescribed, with a more dramatic thrust from the blade. Here, adding to the drama, she is flung to death on the stairs she had just hesitatingly descended. The men on the stage are so centered in their own misery that they take no notice; it is the women per usual, the four hapless maids and Emilia at the bottom of the stairs, who at last set them straight. Curtain.

Gossett rightly labels the third act of *Otello* as the "watershed between the worlds of 18th and 19th century Italian opera." Again, it was surprising how well performing that pivotal act without intermission worked, giving the feel of a completely through-composed piece. Indeed kudos are due all around: to a production team that reinforced Berio's taut conception, to the fine musical direction and orchestral playing, and finally, to a talented cast that handled Rossini's abundant vocal and dramatic demands with such aplomb. Perhaps to the surprise of many in the audience, Rossini's *opera seria* provides not just great singing but powerful drama as well. It was a thrilling night.

The Raven, by Toshio Hosokawa

As in their first three festivals, a stated goal of Festival O22 was to examine the future of opera. They did so this year with their unique performance of *The Raven*, a Monodrama for mezzo-soprano and 12 players with text and libretto by Edgar Allan Poe. This production combined two experiences into one by preceding the 40-minute monodrama itself with a participatory theater experience. Members of the local theatre company Obvious Agency, each a personification of the poem's central metaphorical character Lenore, led members of the audience in small groups through the back regions of the theatre on various ritualistic journeys to recapture memory and/or escape captivity. In my group, a young bare-chested man led us to a small dark room where we formed a circle around a large water-filled vessel, performing tasks to retrieve memory by, among other things, placing small stickers of red hearts in the water, later seeking to retrieve them – and later still, in another room, seeking to free the young man from a web of red strands entangling his body.

This bit of hocus-pocus, flirting with the supernatural, may seem a bit far-fetched, and the question of its effectiveness debatable. But given the admirably enthusiastic leaders, and knowing the haunting poem itself, the justification is sound. After all, the famous poem itself follows a distraught lover's gradual descent into madness,



Pax Ressler of The Obvious Agency as Lenore in the interactive portion Photo: Steven Pisano

lamenting the loss of his love, Lenore. And Poe himself said the talking, obsessive raven was meant to symbolize “Mournful and Never-ending Remembrance.” So too, the poem itself is ripe for operatic interpretation, with its musicality, with frequent internal rhyme and alliteration throughout, right from the opening stanza of the folk-like narrative:

*Once upon a midnight dreary, while I pondered
weak and weary,
Over many a quaint and curious volume of
forgotten lore –
While I nodded nearly napping, suddenly there
came a tapping,
As of some one gently tapping, rapping, at the
chamber door.
“T’s some visitor,” I muttered, “tapping at my
chamber door—
Only this and nothing more.*

And the musicality continues, right through the recurring “leitmotif” of the second half of the poem, closing it as well - the Raven’s “only stock and store,” its obsessive refrain, the one word “Nevermore.”

For the opera, the text of which was the haunting poem itself, both the production and audience were positioned on the stage of the Miller Theatre, the audience surrounding the oblong stage area with the chamber orchestra at one end. The black box intimacy, and the stage itself littered with various paper memorabilia, seemed a fitting extension of the kind of thing we had experienced in our immersive pre-opera rituals. The set, with a few illuminated white doorframes surrounding the performing area, encapsulated the repeated door images of the poem. As with *Otello*'s monochrome set, the audience was well prepared for the journey of bleak despair to follow.



Dancer Muyu Ruba and narrator Kristen Choi

The profound impact of the performance itself came from three elements: the strikingly theatrical narrator, mezzo-soprano Kristen Choi, acrobatic dancer Muyu Ruba as the raven, and the subtle, illusive twelve-member chamber orchestra, at times almost seeming to fade away, led by conductor Eiki Isomura. Director Aria Umezawa stages the work as a tortured dialogue between the narrator and the Raven, with Noh theatre elements such as animal narration and the stark white mask of the Raven informing some aspects of the production. The vocal writing for mezzo was certainly as demanding and theatrical as any Rossini ever wrote, if at times more craggy and even half sung, and Ms. Choi delivered the wide range of colors and pitch demanded by Poe's stylized text with extraordinary flair.

As the program notes state introducing Japan's pre-eminent living composer, Hosokawa "creates his distinctive musical language from the fascinating relationship between Western avant-garde art and traditional Japanese culture.... He gives musical expression to notions of beauty rooted in transience." The minimalist score provides a continuous web of fleeting theatrical effects, ranging from guttural pianissimo string effects to repeated timpani figures "rapping,

rapping at the chamber door." And the orchestra's long, carefully controlled decrescendo closing the piece was breathtaking. In a surprising *coup de théâtre* to the dynamic interchange between raven and narrator, the somber white-robed members of Obvious Agency have drifted back on stage, and the raven has removed its mask and placed it on the floor to embrace and console the broken narrator. It was a poignant and healing close to a haunting, frenetic evening, far removed from Poe's forlorn, despairing close with the Raven "still sitting...just above my chamber door," his eyes with "all the "seeming of a demon's that is dreaming." And the narrator's soul "lifted—nevermore!"

Festival Overview

Philadelphia's enterprising Festival O remains one not to be missed each fall. As well as compelling productions like the two detailed above, the festival offers additional events such as an extensive survey of opera on film - not only full-length features but also enterprising shorts. A new addition this year was "Afternoons at AVA," the esteemed Academy of Vocal Arts. I caught one of these two performances on Saturday afternoon (Sept. 24) between the two operas. Bass-baritone André Courville, a graduate of five years ago whom I had also heard just a month earlier as a fine Don Giovanni at Berkshire Opera Festival, gave a captivating concert, joined at times by two undergraduates. A talented musician, he accompanied himself at times on the piano with especially enchanting renditions of popular songs. This was a nice contrast to the festival's two heartrending operas, as were brief forays into the lively surrounding areas such as bucolic Rittenhouse Square. In sum, as always a trip to Philadelphia's Festival O makes a fine start to the fall season.