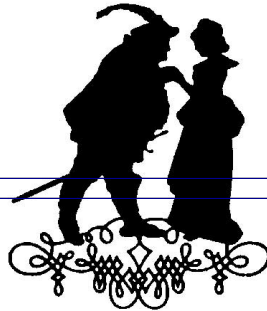


Opera con Brio

Richard B. Beams



Santa Fe Opera Festival 2013

A Season to Savor

A Star-studded *La Donna del Lago*

In the not too distant past, one could count on Santa Fe Opera to exhume even the rarest of operas by Richard Strauss, works of a lush and lingering Romanticism that stretched well into the twentieth century. For the third time in recent seasons, however, the enterprising opera company has turned to the at one time practically extinct corner of the opera repertory, the glorious and vocally demanding *serioso* operas of Gioachino Rossini, the architect of nineteenth century Italian opera. Following the successful revivals of first *Ermione* in 2000 and then *Maometto II* last year in 2012, the company continued its exploration of these vocally demanding operatic gems from Rossini's Naples period (1815-20) in its 2013 season with *La Donna del Lago*, in an earthy production that well-suited the naturalistic flavor of both the Santa Fe setting and the composer's intentions.

Of Rossini's nine serious operas for Naples, *Ermione* (1819) is perhaps the most taut and audacious, so much so that it was

yanked from the stage after just one performance; *Maometto II* (1820), perhaps the most forward looking in musical structure, with ensemble writing so extensive it almost appears a through-composed work at times; and *La Donna del Lago*

(falling between the two, in 1819), perhaps the most conservative and spacious. It was also both the most popular of the three and the most Romantic. Indeed the beguiling work - with the wild natural setting of Walter Scott's evocative narrative poem *The Lady of the Lake* inviting much naturalistic musical scene painting (including off stage hunting horns and chorus) has the honor being the first Italian Romantic opera, although much of it is still couched in a classical mold.



Joyce DiDonato, as Elena, in the finale of Act I
Photo: Ken Howard

The three operas, however, share one important common trait: like most of these Naples works, they were written for three extraordinary, virtuosic singers: the famed Isabella Colbran (soon to become Rossini's wife), with daunting range and vocal flexibility, as Elena, "The Lady of the Lake"; Andrea

Nozzari, equally famed as one of the great tenors of the day, with ringing top Cs but also with a firm lower register as Rodrigo di Dhu, the Highlander chief to whom she (unwillingly) is betrothed; and Giovanni David, another virtuosic tenor, with an especially fluid voice and high *tessitura*, as Uberto, King James of Scotland, who has fallen in love with Elena. The original Naples cast also included a mezzo of comparable stature, Rosmunda Pisoni, for the important trouser role of Malcom, another Highlander in love with Elena.

Any revival of *La Donna del Lago* today will rise or fall on the ability of a company to gather together a comparable cast, and Santa Fe Opera certainly managed to do so. Heading it was the incomparable Joyce DiDonato as Elena, certainly the foremost exponent before the public today of the brilliant, florid artistry demanded of a Rossini heroine. From her charming opening barcarolle, “O mattutini albori,” to her sensational rondo finale “tanti affetti in un momento,” she commanded the stage, not just vocally with all the requisite trills and fioratura the exacting role demands, but as a convincing twenties-some character, the beautiful, self-assured “lady of the lake,” who grows into her own during the course of the opera. Like Cenerentola (the Rossini heroine Ms. DiDonato will sing at the Met in the coming season), Elena too is a rather “rags to riches” story, igniting the audience’s sympathy all the way when done convincingly. And so she did at Santa Fe; one looks forward to *La Cenerentola* next season in New York.



Marianna Pizzolato as Malcom Photo: Ken Howard

The role of Malcom was in fact portrayed by another Cenerentola of note, the young Italian Mezzo-soprano, Marianna Pizzolato, who has been making quite a name for herself in that role in Italy, as she did at The Rossini Opera Festival in 2010, where I last heard her. It is difficult to discuss the trouser role of Malcom without recalling Marilyn Horne’s captivating performances some three decades ago, otherworldly in her earthy bravado and effortless, sonorous coloratura.

Although perhaps lacking the rich tonal depth of Horne, Ms. Pizzolato indeed held her own, not only with her sensitive, expressive entrance aria “Elena! O tu, che chiamo!,” but also with a sensational rendition of her Act II cabaletta, “Che sento!” whose running thirty-second notes were delivered with uncanny ease. Alas, her cumbersome costume, a bulky and unbecoming kilt, kept her from capturing fully the persona of a male Highlander.



Laurence Brownlee as Uberto

Photo: Ken Howard

The two tenors were no less masterful, well defining the archetypes of the respective two superstars who created the roles. Laurence Brownlee, disguised for the most part as Uberto, a hunter, but later revealed to be the King, demonstrated throughout the night both the elegant technique and subtlety of stratospheric *tessitura* characteristic of Giovanni David. All night, he was a joy to listen to, right from his extraordinarily difficult opening aria in Act II, “O fiamma soave,” a love song that more or less defines his unrequited love, a typical subject of the nineteenth century. Although he is the “prince charming” of the opera, he reluctantly but nobly steps aside for Elena’s beloved Malcom at the end. Likewise, René Barbera’s portrayal of the hothead Rodrigo certainly caught the essence of the famous tenor Andres Nozzari. His ringing high notes were right on the button, and the rapid scalar figures full of appropriate oomph. The voice perhaps fades a bit in the bottom range; on the other hand, the battle of high C’s in his duet with Mr. Brownlee was thrilling theatre and vocalism.

One certainly yearns for a realistic set with this opera, filled as it is with so many naturalistic touches from the Scotland of Walter Scott’s narrative poem. Director Paul Curran, Scottish himself, opted not to be so literal; instead, as the Santa Fe program book notes, his production “stripped away” such elements, with “no decorative tartan swags, no picturesque moors shrouded in mist, no fancy Gothic masonry. Instead, the production has a stark, gritty beauty. When hunting or warfare is part of the action, we see the reality of violence before us: the blood of the deer, the enemy’s head mounted on a pike.”



Joyce DiDonato, as Elena, enters in Act I

Photo: Ken Howard

All this meant no lake either - and no boat. As compensation, however, the production played on Santa Fe's natural beauty. In the striking opening scene, rather than have Elena gliding in a small boat toward the shore of Loch Katrine as she sings her gentle barcarolle, Curran has us imagine the lake's shore in the distance as Elena emerges over the crest of the hill on the rugged, barren earthy brown terrain of the set, more New Mexican than Scottish. It was a poignant entrance, heightened by nature itself with the sunset over the New Mexico vista stretching in the distance behind the open Santa Fe stage.

Would that other effects played equally well in the dark and rather brutish staging elsewhere in the opera. But at least there was the spectacular shift to the gold and light of the final scene when Elena finds herself unexpectedly in the palace of Giacomo V (alias Uberto). All the bleakness played well to this shift, of the kind we get in Rossini's last and most Romantic of operas, *William Tell*, with its burst of light and freedom. Indeed both operas incorporate many naturalistic details, warranting more literal attention by the director. No matter. In the end, in this effective, but at times unsettling production, the singing was the thing – aided indeed by the idiomatic conducting of Boston's own Steven Lord, which made the evening, at least on the musical level, an evening of Rossinian vocalism to savor.

A Heroic and Honorable *Oscar*

Perhaps the most anticipated event of the summer was *Oscar*, a new opera commissioned by the Santa Fe Opera and Opera Philadelphia, written especially for illustrious countertenor David Daniels as a vehicle for eulogizing Oscar Wilde, the flamboyant, controversial and sadly downtrodden literary genius of the last century. With expressive, if understated neo-Romantic music by Theodore Morrison, writing his first opera, a witty and well focused libretto authored jointly by Mr. Morrison and British opera director John Cox, and a sterling

production and cast headed by Mr. Daniels, the work succeeded admirably in its stated goal to expose and examine within this portrait of Oscar Wilde, glaring issues of human rights which remain as relevant today as they were a century ago. Wilde becomes a heroic martyr, not just a pitiable figure, as he moves from riches to rags, as it were, from flamboyant celebrity to disgraced prisoner – jailed for two years for “gross indecency” because of his homosexuality. His struggle becomes that of all others of whatever persuasion, gender or race, who face prejudice, repression and even persecution.

With a keen eye for a dramaturgy that would suit their purpose, the creators aptly telescoped the plot (as a good opera always must do) to events around these devastating two years of Wilde's life. A prologue and epilogue, like the reminiscences of Captain Vere in Britten's *Billy Budd*, framed the action of the opera. The reflective narrator is the American poet Walt Whitman, also castigated for his homosexuality, who creates the frame. In reality, Walt Whitman was only tangential in Wilde's life (they had met briefly in America in the early 1980's). In the prologue Whitman, effectively sung, and occasionally spoken by baritone Dwayne Croft, sorrowfully outlines in advance Wilde's fate (unlike Vere, who merely hints at events to come.) Thus in Greek theater fashion, the audience is left in *Oscar* to focus in the opera not on what happens, but on the how and the why; in the epilogue he welcomes Wilde to the world of the immortals, where he himself abides.

David Daniels as Oscar Wilde; Dwayne Croft as Walt Whitman
Photo: Ken Howard

Some have derided the consequent lack of dramatic tension in this work itself, which indeed has much talk - endless argument and exposition, even additional insertions by Whitman - and little action. But this criticism it seems to me misses the point.

In a lecture this past summer at Bard Summerscape, which focused on the works of Igor Stravinsky, distinguished writer and professor Michael Beckerman commented that all music for stage need not be edgy or dramatic (like the quintessentially dramatic *The Rite of Spring*). Great operas have indeed survived effectively without being loaded with excessive drama – Debussy’s *Pelleas et Melisande* for one. Dramatic tension in *Oscar* is not omnipresent, as it is in *Billy Budd*, but it does smolder beneath the surface, to explode in the open only infrequently but effectively.

Such a moment was the close of the first act in the nursery of the home of Ada Levenson, Wilde’s good friend, where he has been forced to find shelter having earlier been refused rooms at every hotel in town because of his notoriety. In some well-needed comic relief, the toys in the nursery come to life and, in a rather grotesque farce, pantomime Wilde’s trial with jack-in-the-box clown as judge and malicious puppets as jury. Tension builds as Wilde cries out “My God, My God,” while the orchestra alludes to Bach’s *St. Matthew Passion* when Jesus sings these words on the cross. The tension and symbolism resume in the prison scene of Act II (Reading Gaol) where Wilde clearly becomes a Christ-like martyr between two prisoners in the infirmary, just as Jesus did on the cross.



The mock trial with David Daniels as Oscar in the crib/dock Photo: Ken Howard

To be sure, Mr. Morrison’s music is highly eclectic, with shades of not just Britten and Bach, but also the likes of Stravinsky, Copeland, Bartok and others, including even Bernstein with an omnipresent motive the pre-opera lecturer rightly labeled the “Maria” theme (with its distinctive yearning rising minor second). But, taking nothing away from Mr. Morrison himself, a seasoned choral writer, an omnipresent influence seemed Benjamin Britten, not just in musical touches but in fundamental dramaturgy, as for example with the offstage chorus of prisoners, as hauntingly effective as the below deck choral shanties in *Billy Budd*.



Reed Luplau as Bosie; David Daniels as Oscar Photo: Ken Howard

An obvious parallel to Britten was also the use of a solo dancer, Reed Luplau, as Bosie (Lord Alfred Douglas), Wilde’s young lover and nemesis, whose own ego essentially brought doom on Wilde. The inspiration was clearly Tadzio in Britten’s last opera, *Death and Venice*, the young Polish boy with whom the aging German author Gustav von Aschenbach is obsessed.

Like Tadzio, Bosie exists only as an obsession in the mind of the central protagonist; unlike Tadzio, Bosie emerges on stage in many guises, at one point as Death itself, but always within the context of Wilde’s imagination, a silent specter. One criticism of the work, expressed by some commentators, is that the opera, so narrowly telescoped (excluding, for example, scenes from Wilde’s earlier more flamboyant life) provides little opportunity for character development or change; but the often moving scenes in which the dancer and Wilde interact allow moments of insight, not just into the various persona of the dancer, but also into Wilde’s evolving emotional life. This device, although perhaps not a perfect solution, goes a long way toward illuminating Wilde’s inner life up to and including the action of the opera

In the end, however, what carried the work was Mr. Daniels’ interpretation of Oscar Wilde. As clearly the star of the show, Mr. Daniels both mastered a lengthy and difficult role and took a special interest in performing it as well. Additionally, his distinctive and rich counter-tenor voice was a perfect match. An article in the June issue of *Opera News*, “Wilde at Heart,” quoted a contemporary source who reported that Wilde “had one of the most alluring voices that I have ever listened to, round and soft, and full of variety and expression.” The article then cited another contemporary source who referred to Wilde’s “mezzo voice, uttering itself in leisurely fashion.” What could be more perfect, stated Mr. Morrison, than David Daniels in this role?

Indeed it was Mr. Daniels who carried the day. As critic James Keller has pointed out in *The New Mexican*, Walt Whitman, having just heard a favorite tenor, is said to have exclaimed the following regarding how an emotional message may be intensified through an operatic setting: “Never before did I realize what an indescribable volume of delight the recesses of the soul can hear from the sound of the honied perfection of the human voice.” It is this “honied” perfection that the score seemed to so effectively exploit – especially with Mr. Daniels. Mr. Morrison’s selective orchestration allowed some words – such as “endless” or “rowdiness” – to take flight, often with a kind of baroque ornamentation and elaboration – a specialty of David Daniels.



David Daniels as Oscar; Heidi Stober as Ada Levenson
Photo: Ken Howard

To be sure, many other fine singers contributed to the success of the evening: Heidi Stober, exhibiting the Straussian fervor of last year’s *Ariadne*, a fine Ada Levenson; tenor William Burden, a Santa Fe regular, a sturdy Frank Harris (Wilde’s loyal friend); bass Kevin Burdette, effectively ominous as both clown judge in Act I, and the cruel Colonel Isaacson in Act II; baritone Dwayne Croft as Walt Whitman. Nor would the evening have been such a success without the essential non-singing element, dancer Reed Luplau as Bosie, imaginatively choreographed by Sean Curran, nor indeed the sensitive conducting by Evan Rogister of this ethereal and expressive score.

Without Mr. Daniels in the lead, will the opera take flight on its own? Time will tell. My bet is that it will, for the opera explores not just the elegance and warmth of the human voice, but with some considerable impact, the fundamental and timeless issue of human rights. Next stop, fittingly, Philadelphia.



Antics in Gerolstein

Photo: Ken Howard

The Grand Duchess of Gerolstein Misfires

A third Santa Fe production built essentially around star power was Offenbach’s frothy *opéra-bouffe*, *La Grande-duchesse de Gerolstein*. Although much anticipated, it was a less successful venture. The “star,” Susan Graham, as the Grand Duchess, glorious vocally as always, in spite of an abundance of scoops and slides, was somehow neither as charismatic nor alluring as the role demands. The production, cluttered to the hilt – more like being at the circus or at Radio City Hall with a male version of the Rockettes than at an opera – was expertly danced and choreographed, with many athletic antics and much fervent activity. However, it all failed to rise above the commonplace.

It was not always so. For years – four seasons in fact between 1971 and 1979 – the operetta was a Santa Fe staple, and one of its most popular productions. A friend and colleague Charles Jernigan, who attended the 1979 performance, points out that the production was very funny indeed: “when the opera’s overture started (a march) and the notables of Gerolstein marched down the theater’s aisle, the piece was stopped by one of the characters who demanded that the audience stand while Gerolstein’s national anthem was played.”

After an absence of some thirty-four years from the Santa Fe stage, and given the hype preceding the 2013 production, one hoped for more. Indeed the cast was fine: bass Kevin Burdette, a vocally solid and especially athletic General Boum, particularly in his famous “biff-paff-piff” parody aria; tenor Paul Appleby as the Duchess’s would-be lover Private Fritz; soprano Anya Matanovič as Fritz’s preferred sweetheart, and others. But Susan Graham, wonderful artist that she is, was basically rather distant from all the excessive stage silliness. Over the years I’ve had the good fortune to experience many of her great roles on the world’s opera stages: Octavian, Iphigénie, Ruggiero in Handel’s *Alcina* and numerous others – sung typically with refined elegance, control, beauty and passion. But she was never much of a comedienne; nor was



Susan Graham as the Duchess; Paul Appleby as Fritz
Photo: Ken Howard

she as the Grand Duchess of Gerolstein, exhibiting little of the infectious bravado that can so bring this character to life.

If it is true, as I have heard, that Ms. Graham had reservations about assuming the role of the Grand Duchess in the first place, I can understand why. Boston audiences still cherish the 2010 Opera Boston Production in which the formidable mezzo Stephanie Blythe gave so complete and thrilling an interpretation of the Grand Duchess that a smile was on the face of every member of the audience all evening. Indeed Ms. Blythe had made her Santa Fe debut in 2002 with a captivating Isabella in Rossini's *L'italiana in Algeri*. Without meaning to be unkind, one can't help but wish that the girl in Algiers had found her way to Gerolstein this summer.

For me the reason the mildly entertaining production fell flat, however, lay elsewhere. The silly story, of a bored Duchess concocting war games for her own entertainment, is in fact a rich and biting satire, typical of Offenbach, aimed at war and warmongers, and at how easy it is for a country to slide into a meaningless war. (Fodder indeed for a contemporary update.) But the production team, led by director Lee Blakeley, moved the action back to a mid-western military academy, circa



The military academy Photo: Ken Howard

1900. Ennui sets in from the start. Further undermining things, the spoken dialogue was in English while all musical numbers were in the original French. The tasteless dialogue, evidently written by Blakeley, was simply wooden and unfunny, with overly explicit innuendos and anti-Offenbach contemporary jokes. Ennui triumphed.

Best to have it all in French, or all in English with idiomatic translation. Best not to overstuff the charming work with histrionic antics or corny jokes. Best to let the charming work stand on its own, as Santa Fe did once in the past. Best to make some careful musical cuts (as in the extended Act II finale which went on too long with the addition of material usually not included). A night in the theatre with the Grand Duchess can be extraordinary, not ordinary. Maybe next time it will be.



Brenda Rae as Violetta; Michael Fabiano as Alfredo Photo: Ken Howard

A Frenetic *La Traviata*, Successfully Revived

A recurrent pleasure at Santa Fe Opera is the consistently high level of revived productions. Such, apparently, was the case again in 2013 with an engaging revival of the delightful flower-strewn Mozart favorite, *The Marriage of Figaro* (I attended it in 2008, but alas was unable to do so this season). Also well received was the tomb-ridden production of Verdi's equally popular *La Traviata* from 2009, which on this occasion I found considerably more compelling than I had at the premiere four years ago.

Much of this I credit to British conductor Leo Hussain and the sensitive conducting of this often-ethereal score. But much of it was the two young Americans who took the lead roles of Alfredo Germont and Violetta Valéry: tenor Michael Fabiano, providing a youthful vigor and expressiveness throughout the evening, but particularly in the tonal freshness of his Act II



Brenda Rae as Violetta

Photo: Ken Howard

aria, “*Dei miei bollenti spiriti*”; and especially the captivating soprano Brenda Rae who exhibited with flawless and seemingly effortless technique the diverse demands of this challenging role, from her virtuosic “*Sempre libera*” concluding Act I to her final, poignant “*Addio del passato*” in Act III. The star-power of Natalie Dessay had not worked for me in 2009. In this year’s revival, on the other hand, Ms. Rae, vocally exquisite throughout the evening, displayed just the right amount of unforced gaiety (in Act I), grief-stricken passion (the famous “*Amami, Alfredo*,” in Act II, for example), and ethereal longing (“*Parigi, o cara*”) in her final death scene.

The musical expressiveness was aided by a production that seemed to work much better this time around. Directed again by Laurent Pelly, the revival seems to emphasize the reckless abandon – almost a death wish – of the consumptive Violetta. Perhaps taking a cue from the opera’s literary source, Alexandre Dumas *filis*’ novella, *La Dame aux Camelias*, in which the narrator looks back at the outset at the covered belongings of the now-deceased courtesan, the opera begins with a funeral procession during the prelude (which itself anticipates Violetta’s final death scene), winding through the tomb like blocks scattered on the stage. Alfredo (narrator-like) weeps in the distance, as in the novella when the fictional Armand (Alfredo) arrives in Paris too late and weeps at her

grave. In the opera’s closing scene, the blocks are all covered with white sheets; Violetta yanks one of them off as she dies. Her tomb awaits, as predicted at the outset.

Throughout the opera, the direction suggests not just that death hangs over Violetta constantly but also that she invites it with her flamboyant lifestyle. Warned in the novella that she is killing herself with her devil-may-care attitude, she answers, “What keeps me going is the life I lead. Women like me are abandoned the moment we are of no more use...” The production shows her isolation, disconnectedness, and resulting death-inviting frenzy. The opening tableau quickly gives over to a frenetic party going on in Violetta’s home; the confrontation in Act II between Violetta and Alfredo’s father, Giorgio Germont, remains rather cool and disengaged.

In the end, it was Ms. Rae who encapsulated the essence of this production and of this overwrought Violetta, with one of the more moving and engaging interpretations I have encountered in recent years – a performance (and a production) indeed worthy of this year’s Verdi bicentennial. The evening was perhaps not the most eagerly anticipated event of the 2013 season; but it too, like most others at Santa Fe, was an evening to savor and remember.

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