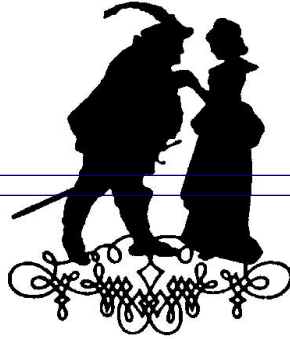


# Opera con Brio

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Richard B. Beams



## Santa Fe Opera, 2012

### *Maometto II* Triumphs in a Solid Season

After many years of attending performances of opera, including all thirty-nine of Rossini's works for stage, I occasionally leave a performance that is so compelling, powerful and moving that I find myself saying, this is why I still go to the opera. Such an occasion was the production of Rossini's rarely encountered ambitious opera seria, *Maometto II*, given a truly festival-level performance during the summer of 2012 at the always-enticing Santa Fe opera. Indeed one could utter the same sentiments for the five-opera season itself, one of the more satisfying and artistically sound in recent memory, with its wide ranging and engaging array of the familiar, Puccini's *Tosca*, to the esoteric, Karl Szymanowski's bewilderingly symbolic *King Roger*.

#### A Monumental Work from the Past

In his essay introducing the opera in the Santa Fe program book, renowned musicologist and Rossini expert Philip Gossett calls *Maometto II* "one of the greatest serious operas written during the 19<sup>th</sup> century," an assertion he has been making now for many years. Rightly so. I first realized the validity of this assertion at the modern premiere of the work in 1985 at the Rossini Opera Festival held each year in Rossini's birthplace, Pesaro, Italy. The young Samuel Ramey was mesmerizing as the titular Maometto; the waif-like soprano, Cecelia Gasdia, a Gossett protégé, poignantly expressive in every wrenching phrase; Chris Merritt, at the height of his career, a thrilling, clarion Rossini tenor as Ann's father, Paolo Erisso; and the exquisite rich-toned contralto, Lucia Valentini-Terrani (who sadly would die of cancer all too soon) in the trouser role of Calbo, Anna's betrothed.



Luca Pisaroni as Maometto II

Photo: Ken Howard

Inside the intimate sold-out Teatro Rossini, the audience, who greeted the work with rapturous applause, included the likes of June Anderson, who had just recorded the opera for London. Outside, in the town's central piazza, the opening performance was simulcast on a giant screen to another packed audience, not a usual practice in those days, and by extension to a national TV audience. The next day the town was all a buzz. When I met Sam Ramey at a local newsstand, he looked down at my four-year-old son, who had sat spellbound through the video performance, grinning as he confided to him in his resonant bass, "I was captain of the "red team." (The invading Turks wore red; the victimized Venetians wore blue.) It was a moment to remember.

## A Performance in Santa Fe to Match the Best

As for the opera itself, it was the kind of cast and performance I never dreamed would be matched. San Francisco came close in 1988, with Marilyn Horne, June Anderson, Chris Merritt, and Simone Alaimo, borrowing the Met's colorful sets from *Le siège de Corinthe*, Rossini's later revision of the work for Paris. But Santa Fe Opera in the summer of 2012 proved me wrong. At my first hearing in 1985, I had yet to become aware of the power and scope of Rossini's vast output of serious operas, some two thirds of his thirty-nine operas. Now having had the good fortune to attend a staged performance of all of these works, I can also appreciate another assertion of Gossett's, that this is "perhaps Rossini's most ambitious opera." The wonderful Santa Fe production, with a stellar cast fully capable of delivering on Rossini's vocal demands, equaled the thrill of my first encounter with this score – and cemented for me the notion that this work, in all its innovation and mastery, is not only Rossini at his best, but indeed one of the seminal works in nineteenth century serious opera.

Santa Fe advertised the work as the world premiere of a new critical edition by Hans Schellevis, with Philip Gossett as General Editor. This may certainly be true although Gossett was involved with an earlier "critical edition" based on the autograph score now at the Rossini Foundation in Pesaro, which has not yet been published. Be that as it may, what matters – indeed what helped make Santa Fe's production so compelling – came down simply to the two fundamental elements of any performance: the production, directed with such care and sensitivity by David Alden, and the cast, led with such idiomatic sensitivity by Frédéric Chaslin, Chief Conductor at Santa Fe. As with any successful performance, the two elements wonderfully meshed, not always the case these days with the plethora of either updated and/or "concept" productions that wrench apart the integrity of the composer's intent.

The opera itself is built around the historical background of the wars between Venice and the Ottoman Empire in the 15<sup>th</sup> century, which culminated finally in the fall of Negroponte (today's island of Euboea in Greece). However, Maometto II's plundering is not Rossini's primary concern. As an archetypal Italian opera of the day, indeed of the century, the work focuses on the conflict between love and duty. Familial honor is front and center. Anna, the daughter of Negroponte's leader, Paolo Erisso, must choose between love and duty: her love for Maometto, earlier disguised as "Uberto," and her obligation for political reasons to marry her father's choice, Calbo, general of the Negroponte forces.

Rossini thus must establish clearly the important father-daughter relationship, which he does in the first act's extraordinary 867 bar "terzettone" (big fat trio); but the larger concern, what the opera is



Leah Crocetto as Anna Photo: Ken Howard

really about, as one writer has put it, is "a glorification of the sacrifice of a single woman." The woman is Anna, of course (the famous Isabella Colbran in Rossini's original production, later to be his first wife). Her self-sacrifice becomes emblematic, not just of an irresolvable personal plight, but also of a national suffering brought on by the horrors of war.

## A Production with Integrity

Director David Alden sometimes creates productions with forced "concepts" that invite commentary on contemporary issues. Not so in Santa Fe, although to set the opera today in the Middle East might have been tempting. Simply, the stark unit set, often with harsh lighting, reflected the horror of war in general. At the same time the set allowed numerous possibilities for the strikingly unified story and



The striking set for *Maometto II*

Photo: Ken Howard



The three Venetian protagonists: Calbo (Patricia Bardon), Anna (Leah Crocetto) and Paolo (Bruce Sledge) Photo: Ken Howard

score, with all its considerable subtly and dramatic flow. Although Anna is certainly the central character of the opera, the production also focused on Anna's mother, no longer alive, but a felt presence (as is typical again in Italian serious opera). Anna will pray to her; Paolo, later in the opera, will apostrophize her in a moving lament. Her "presence" is a necessary component, representing the omnipresent familial devotion. How fitting then, that among the few items to dot the austere unit set would be a portrait of Anna's mother.

Mention of Rossini's groundbreaking "terzettone" reminds one of why Gossett called *Maometto II* Rossini's "most ambitious opera." In his words, Rossini "frequently avoids altogether many of the 'standard' formal conventions of Italian opera which he almost single-handedly had codified during the preceding decade, while enormously expanding some of these forms internally." The multi-faceted, almost half-hour long "terzettone" includes not only the three Venetian protagonists (Calbo, Anna, and her father) as they respond variously to their complex dilemma, but also initiates the intrusion of the Turkish siege, with choral insertions and the like. Alden's production and direction permitted the dramatic unity and flow that the musical numbers invite, without their traditional applause points; at the same time, it permitted the cast to move front and center to spotlight both the innovative ensemble and virtuosic solo numbers.

### A Stellar Cast

And what a cast it was. As with all Rossini's nine Neapolitan operas, *Maometto II* requires extraordinary singers. Heading the cast for Rossini was his wife-to-be, the dynamic *prima donna* Isabella Colbran as Anna. Assuming her role in Santa Fe was a young, relatively unknown American soprano from Connecticut, Leah Crocetto. As with Cecilia Gasdia some years ago, she was the great surprise of the

evening, capably meeting all Rossini's virtuoso demands for range and, especially in her final twenty-minute *scena*, for both dramatic intensity and coloratura. On stage for most of the opera, she has the most demanding role, moving from a simple youthfulness to become eventually a tragic heroine. She mastered all in this, her stunning Santa Fe debut. Indeed it was a "star is born" kind of performance.

On the other hand, the equally impressive performance of the experienced bass-baritone Luca Pisoni was no surprise. Having thrilled audiences earlier in the year, at the Met as Caliban in the extravagant baroque "pasticcio," *The Enchanted Island*, and in Chicago Lyric Opera's *Rinaldo*, as the villainous Argene, he did so again at Santa Fe in the title role. (See *OCB* reviews of *The Enchanted Island* and of *Rinaldo* at [www.operaconbrio.com/Reviews](http://www.operaconbrio.com/Reviews).) Rossini's score pointedly delays Maometto II's entrance; he is the last major character to appear, although we are always aware of the lurking "presence" of him and the invading Turks. But when he does enter with his entrance aria, the stunning cabaletta, "Duce di tanti eroi," with its exhilarating flood of thirty-second notes, finally invites the audience to let loose as well. And so they did, clearly in praise of Mr. Pisoni's fluency, power, and skill. He may not have been "captain of the red team," nor did he enter bare chested riding on one of his warrior's shoulders as had Mr. Ramey in Pesaro, but he was every bit as compelling. All evening, his was a performance to savor, not just for bravado vocal display, but also for his refined, subtle and expressive phrasing, especially in later more tender moments with Anna.

The other two major roles were no letdown, especially with Bruce Sledge in the demanding tenor role of Paolo Erisso, a role first taken in Naples by the brilliant but dark-toned "baritonal tenor" Andrea Nozzari, and in recent times by Chris Merritt. These were large shoes to fill, since the role demands agility and heroic power, as well as lower and darker tones than the typical Rossini "tenore di grazia" of the comedies. Mr. Sledge met all these demands, in a range of expression that moved from vehement calls to battle to the nuanced and moving lament to his deceased wife ("Tenera Sposa"). In the other major role, Patricia Bardon, a young mezzo from Ireland, more than



Bruce Sledge as Paolo and Luca Pisoni as Maometto II  
Photo: Ken Howard



filled the demands of the trouser role Calbo – especially in her demanding aria “Non temer” in Act II, a piece so difficult that Rossini himself later revised it. Marilyn Horne always used to sing it with gusto and ease. Bardon was just as exciting, if not just as at ease.

## Thunderous Ovations

At opening night in Santa Fe on July 14, which I was unable to attend, reports were that many empty seats dotted the theater for this unfamiliar work, more so after the intermission. Lack of the customary applause points evidently inhibited the audience response; apparently, few knew when, or if, to applaud. Clearly by the time I attended *Maometto II*, on August 2, the audience had caught on. The house was full, the audience, wildly enthusiastic. Indeed on that night, rather than a video simulcast on the piazza in Santa Fe, the drama of the night was enhanced by as unrelenting a series of thunderstorms as I have ever encountered at Santa Fe Opera. (Indeed at one point, the chorus admonishes Anna to “flee the approaching storms”... precipitating more than a few nervous chuckles in the audience.) But so admirable and compelling was the performance, even with all the thunderous commotion, few if any in the audience fled; and bravos at the end, amidst more storminess, went on and on. The opera had become the hit of the season.

I should note also that the 1820 premiere of *Maometto II* was not a success initially either. The opera even then was all too audacious for the audience. Rossini soon revised the opera for Venice, among other things borrowing the soprano’s ecstatic rondo finale from *La Donna del Lago*, written just a year earlier in Naples. Happily, one can hear this rondo next summer in the 2013 season, when Santa Fe Opera will perform this beautiful, lyrical work in its entirety, with a cast that offers just as much promise as that of *Maometto II*: the incomparable Joyce DiDonato in the title role, Elena; two wonderful “tenore di grazia,” Lawrence Browning and Rene Barbera; and one of foremost Italian mezzos, a regular in Pesaro, Daniele Barcellona. Former Boston Lyric Opera Music Director Stephen Lord conducts, making his Santa Fe debut. This too will be a performance not to miss.

## A Season of High Standards

Deservedly, *Maometto II* became the hit of the season. Happily, however, Santa Fe’s typically well-balanced season had more to offer, with the quality of performances and productions at a consistently high level. This was especially true of the impeccable performance of Strauss’ 1933 “Lyrical Comedy” *Arabella*, under the assured baton of Sir Andrew Davis, as well as of the rarity, Karol Szymanowski’s 1926 symbolist opera, *King Roger*. The other two “crowd pleasers” fared well also, Bizet’s lyrical little jewel *The Pearl Fishers*, no longer the unknown work it once was, and the sure-fire *verisimo* shocker, Puccini’s *Tosca*, which never fails to fill the house.

## A Provocative Pairing: *Arabella* and *King Roger*

For me, the most satisfying of these was *Arabella*; the most interesting, *King Roger*. Whether intended or not, Santa Fe Opera’s choice of these two works, written within a few years of each other, made a provocative pairing. For Strauss, it was the final collaboration with his long-time librettist Hugo von Hofmannsthal, following shortly on the heels of the symbolic fairytale, *Die Frau ohne Schatten* (yet to be performed by Santa Fe) and an equally exotic excursion into mythology, *Die Aegyptische Helena*. With *Arabella*, Hofmannsthal



Erin Wall as Arabella and Mark Delavan as Mandryka  
Photo: Ken Howard

wished to return to the human world, placing the diverse protagonists (including waiters, cabbies, officers and the like) in very recognizable surroundings (a hotel room, a ball room, a hotel lobby). The clear issue of the day (and night) is that of a betrothal - longed for, then promised, broken off and finally fulfilled.

With Szymanowski’s symbolist opera, on the other hand, we re-enter a more mystifying kingdom, similar to those of the earlier Hoffmannsthal/Strauss collaborations. The kingdom of Roger, his people, and Church officials is unsettled because a Shepherd has arrived, challenging the traditional orthodoxies. The Stage Director, Stephen Wadsworth, prepared a handout for the arriving audience, clarifying the ending:



Mariusz Kwiecien as King Roger and William Burden as the Shepherd  
Photo: Ken Howard

“Roger joins with her (Roxana, his wife) in a rite that brings the Shepherd: ‘My voice comes from your own heart,’ he says to Roger. His followers draw Roger further into the rite, but Roger stops short of continuing on with them. Day comes. Roger greets the sun, alone (but for his closest adviser, Edrisi) with a purified heart.”

My colleague Charles Jernigan pointed out to me that the plot is clearly founded on Euripides’ great tragedy, *The Bacchae*. Roger thus becomes the more contemplative Pentheus, torn between the Apollonian (reason, duty, Christianity, kingdom, the sun) and the Dionysian (love, chaos, emotion, shadow). In the end, the not-so clear issue of the day (and night) is still not so clear, befitting such a probing, philosophical symbolist work. Rightly, Mr. Wadsworth’s direction stressed the symbolic, not the realistic.

To Santa Fe’s considerable credit, the respective productions of each work were both apt and compelling. *Arabella*, a co-production with the Canadian Opera and the Minnesota Opera, seemed to take heed of Hoffmansthal’s admonition to Strauss, that the atmosphere of *Arabella*, in comparison to that of *Der Rosenkavalier*, be “more ordinary, less glamorous.” Thus the simple but functional set (with the ballroom of the second act, for example, suggested by entrances and exits but not viewed) effectively let the characters come forward and clearly articulate Strauss’s “sprechgesang” amidst the transparent scoring that Maestro Davis nicely illuminated.

To a person, the superb cast brought to life Strauss’ vivid characters: The statuesque Canadian soprano Erin Wall as Arabella sang with subtlety and elegance throughout the evening, becoming especially expressive in her lush final scene, offering forgiveness to her fiancé, Mandryka. He in turn, the sonorous Baritone Mark Delavan as a rough-edged Croatian landowner, became a most believable character in the hands of this seasoned artist. Likewise, soprano Heidi Stober, in the trouser role of Zdenko (Arbella’s sister dressed as a boy) was as believably youthful, as expressively Straussian as one could want. (Shades indeed of her captivating Gretel recently at the Met.) The entire fine cast, in fact, help contribute to an *Arabella* that was more engaging and true than many I have seen on stage, indeed reminiscent of the heyday of many fine Strauss performances at Santa Fe during the Crosby era.

Many elements made the production of *King Roger* a compelling evening as well. The often beautiful set included rotating mosaics on the back wall, suggesting in turn the three symbolic settings: a church interior, Roger’s rooms, and finally an outdoor ritual space. The fine conducting of Evan Rogister brought to life a difficult and complex score, while the large chorus articulated with vigor the Polish words. In the two critical lead roles, tenor William Burden excelled as the Shepherd, and Polish Baritone Mariusz Kwiecien, experienced in the role, realized an idiomatic and polished portrayal of the tormented king. The concise production (three short acts without a break) stressed symbolist elements as well, with a mixture of styles, ranging from the twelfth century to the twentieth century. Roger’s ornate cape and crown were juxtaposed effectively with the shepherd’s fawn skin costume – transformed into the goat-legs of Dionysus in Act III. Could all this have worked as effectively as an oratorio? Probably. But to Santa Fe’s credit, a compelling evening of music theatre emerged.



Amanda Echaz as Tosca Photo: Ken Howard

## Two Crowd-Pleasers: *Tosca* and *The Pearl Fishers*

The two more familiar operas, *Tosca* and *The Pearl Fishers* (almost a repertory opera these days) fared decently enough. Indeed it’s difficult for either work not to please an audience, the first with its taut and carefully structured drama, the second with its lush lyricism – including perhaps the most famous tenor-baritone duet in French opera, “Ou fond du temple saint,” whose melody weaves its way as a motif throughout the score. Both productions pleased, as they should. The respective archetypal love triangles of each, a baritone and a tenor in love with the same soprano, make for a superficial comparison, but given the respective idioms, Italian *verismo* and French lyric opera, they provide strikingly contrasting evenings of theater. Joseph Kerman may have famously labeled *Tosca* a “shabby little shocker,” but it never fails to work; *The Pearl Fishers* may have a rather silly story built on a hard-to-believe coincidence, but it too, thanks to Bizet’s lush score, pulls the audience in.

Good singing also helps. We can all name our favorite Toscas. Amanda Echaz, as attractive as she is, may yet prove one of them, although at this point she lacked the brio for such phrases as her curt queries to the demands of Scarpia “Quanto? Il prezzo?” The famous “Vissi d’arte” too lacked the reflective depth it warrants. The Scarpia of Raymond Aceto was fine, but again to my ears not really staunch enough for the role. Brian Jagde was the replacement tenor on this evening (July 31), but unfortunately he loved milking sustained high notes for all he could, as in his Act I “Recondita armonia.” In act three, his “E lucevan le stele” received no applause. On the other



Eric Cutler as Nadir and the Chorus in *The Pearlfisher* Photo: Ken Howard

hand, in the *Pearl Fishers*, Eric Cutler, familiar to Boston performances for his stunning Nemorino in the Boston Lyric Opera's production of *L'Elisir d'Amore*, enchanted in his dreamy aria "le crois entendre encore," singing with all the subtlety and expressive phrase the piece required. The ovation was well deserved indeed. As his long-time love interest, soprano Nicole Cabell made a lovely, if duskier-voiced Leila than usual.

Over all, thanks again to the fine conducting of Chief Conductor Frédéric Chaslin in *Tosca* and veteran French conductor Emmanuel Villaume in *The Pearl Fishers*, as well as two fairly traditional and carefully directed productions, both evenings were very much a success. In *Tosca*, directors today often conjure up outrageous antics to somehow be innovative and/or "current" in such a familiar work. Director Stephen Barlow pushed in this direction, having Tosca stab Scarpia with a hair pin rather than with a dinner knife, then dragging the body through a door rather than laying it out for Puccini's carefully crafted ritual with candles and cross. And, while it was effective to have no break following this scene before Act III, I didn't much like hearing the distant shepherd's song and accompanying pastoral orchestral tableau while still viewing the scene of the grim crime. But none of this spoiled the evening, even if it did not improve on Puccini. All in all, both productions found Santa Fe presenting, per usual, thoughtful, intelligent, and well-done performances of familiar fare.

## Looking Ahead to 2013

Next year's season looks just as promising. For one thing it will help celebrate the bicentennial of Verdi's birth, with his ever-popular masterpiece, *La Traviata*; indeed an anniversary concert will also honor the bicentennial of Wagner's birth as well as the centennial of Benjamin Britten's birth (who in recent years has received compelling productions in Santa Fe of both *Billy Budd* and *Peter Grimes*.) A commemorative concert will also celebrate Santa Fe's important connections with Stravinsky.

Following its long tradition of world premieres, Santa Fe presents Theodore Morrison's new opera *Oscar* about the life of Oscar Wild. Counter-tenor David Daniels is sure to provide a vivid characterization in the lead, and returning artists from this season, Heidi Stober and William Burden, as well as conductor Evan Rogister, will help him. The wonderful mezzo-soprano Susan Graham, taking the lead in Offenbach's bubbling operetta *The Grand Duchess of Gerolstein*, will certainly provide another vivid portrayal. And who would ever want to be without Mozart's *The Marriage of Figaro*, understandably often revived at Santa Fe and always a treat.

Still, my prediction for the hit of the upcoming season is Rossini's *La Donna del Lago*, with or without another "grand temporale" to help transport the audience into the wild Scottish landscape of this, Rossini's most Romantic Italian opera. But who knows? It's always a pleasure to be surprised in Santa Fe.

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The Santa Fe Opera House