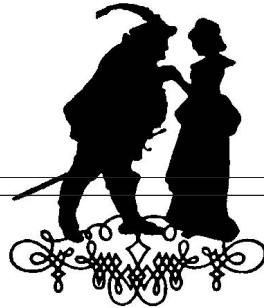


Opera con Brio

Richard B. Beams



Sarasota Opera 2024:

Haydn's Delightful *L'infedeltà Delusa* Caps a Fine Season

Some two hundred and fifty years ago (in 1773) Empress Maria Theresa attended a performance of Haydn's opera *L'Infedeltà Delusa* at the estate of Prince Nicholas Esterházy, Haydn's patron. After the performance, she is quoted as saying, "If I want to hear good opera, I go to Esterháza." Some forty years ago, in 1982, Victor DeRenzi was appointed Artistic Director of Sarasota Opera, and some years afterward, in 1989, he would initiate the comprehensive Verdi Cycle, mandating the performance of all Verdi's 32 operas (counting revisions). About this time, a staunch participant in my opera-education program, *Opera con Brio*, and a part-time resident in Sarasota said to me: "Richard, we have a wonderful little opera house down here. If you want to hear good opera, come to Sarasota."

Skeptical at first, I soon followed this advice, since I was then teaching Verdi's operas and was also on a quest to hear all these operas staged at some point, a quest completed many thanks to

regular jaunts to Sarasota for over some twenty years. Highlights were many – for example both the 1857 and 1881 versions of *Simon Boccanegra* in a single season, 1992; the original French *Les Vêpres Sicilennes* in 1994; and both Verdi's first and last operas, the unsuccessful *Oberto* and the ever-green *Falstaff*, in a single season, 2001. And always in Sarasota, be it a Verdi opera or often, but not always, another 19th century opera, Director DeRenzi's approach was in his own words, "radical." As he once said to me, "I perform operas as the composer intended." Thus, he allows the works to speak for themselves, without imposing extraneous concepts on them.

Such was the case this year, with two of the most familiar and popular repertory works, Bizet's *Carmen* and Donizetti's *Lucia di Lammermoor*, in addition to the relative rarity by Verdi, *Luisa Miller* - all refreshingly powerful and idiomatic in their straightforward, no-nonsense productions. And with the support and rhythmic clarity of various



Chelsea Laggan as Carmen Photo: Rod Millington



Aviva Fortunata as Luisa Miller Photo: Rod Millington

conductors, including Maestro DeRenzi for the Verdi works, and the apprentice artists as chorus, a plethora of talented young soloists made the trip to Sarasota worth it as always. Among the many fine performers this season, the three artists performing the doomed titular protagonists excelled: former Studio Artist mezzo-soprano Chelsea Laggan in her Sarasota Opera debut as an earthy, feisty Carmen, commanding in all her diverse scenes; soprano Ashley Milanese, also in her Sarasota Opera debut, a vibrant, heartrending Lucia, especially in her scorching mad scene; and Soprano Aviva Fortunata a powerful and expressive foil as Luisa Miller to the dark, male-dominated melodrama, an initial *opera semi-seria* turned tragedy.



Ashley Milanese as Lucia Photo: Rod Millington

But for me the gem of the season amidst all these powerful dramas, was Sarasota's rare excursion into 18th century opera before Mozart - Haydn's *L'Infedeltà Delusa* that so enthralled Empress Maria Theresa in another century; indeed, this was the first opera by Haydn ever performed at Sarasota Opera.

***L'Infedeltà Delusa:
Burletta per Musica in due atti***

The musical farce, *L'Infedeltà Delusa* (*Infidelity Outwitted*, commonly also translated *Deceit Outwitted* as in the Sarasota program book) calls for just five characters and no chorus. Conductor Anthony Barrese, Assistant to the Musical Staff since 2002, led the chamber orchestra from a fortepiano, assuring special attention to the recitative of what is perhaps the best libretto, and the tightest dramatically, that Haydn ever set in his thirteen operas. Five talented young singers navigated the antics of a convoluted plot with both brio and secure vocal technique, singing amidst the gorgeous pastoral setting of a small Italian village near Florence. It was all a sheer delight, to me and to an audience perhaps more accustomed to 19th century melodrama.



Hanna Brammer as Vespina; Yulan Piao as Sandrina;
Filippo Fontana as Nanni; David Walton as Filippo
Photo: Rod Millington

The setting is outside the bucolic country home of Filippo, an elderly peasant (tenor David Walton) and his daughter Sandrina (soprano Yulan Piao). At the start an extended, cohesive ensemble begins, one of the greatest Haydn ever wrote for operatic music, according to the editor of the score currently in use, C. H. R. Landon. And who could argue? Sandrina’s father and Nencio, a wealthy farmer (tenor William Davenport) along with two other peasants, the brother and sister Nanni (baritone Filippo Fontana) and Vespina (soprano Hanna Brammer) pause to watch the sunset over the blue Tuscan hills: “Bella sera, ed aure grate...” (“Lovely evening, breeze soft blowing...”).

This magnificent piece was perhaps the first ever to illuminate such simple peasant characters in such a forthright, colorful ensemble. As it develops, led with skill and panache by Maestro Barrese, Filippo lets the wealthy Nencio know that he would be a much better match for his daughter than her young, poorer suitor Nanni. Sandrina still hopes for the best, as does Vespina, enamored of Nencio. Complications ensue, but are not resolved (restoring the original pairs) until deceit is outwitted via some convoluted plotting on the part of the quick-witted Vespina to set things straight.

This happens in the only other ensemble in the opera (save a brief finale), a vibrant duet between Vespina and her brother in their house during the second scene. In this breathtaking number, the outraged brother and sister toss words back and forth, as in the best of animated realistic recitative – of which there is in fact much in this charming opera.

Crafty *commedia* impersonations: Vespina takes over!

To the credit of stage director Marco Nisticò, he sets off this seminal scene for brother and sister with a brief pause from surrounding outdoor scenes to the meticulously detailed interior of their peasant home. Before the duet begins, the jilted Vespina had sung to herself, “love is a bee that gives honey but stings the heart...” while cleaning the salad and doing other small jobs indicated in the libretto. Like Despina (“little despot”) in Mozart’s *Così fan Tutte*, Vespina (“little wasp”) is a careful manipulator of the plot. Thus in Act II the versatile Ms. Brammer as Vespina becomes the centerpiece of the opera when with her crafty impersonations and disguised tones, she buzzes around, putting deceit and disguise to work as part of her complicated plan to ensure that Sandrina marries Nanni, leaving Nencio free to marry her.

First, putting aside her pure vocal lyricism in Act I, she plays the role of an aged and deserted old woman, with affected nasal tone and exaggerated comic antics. Claiming to have been abandoned with three young children, she confronts Filippo with the supposed infidelity of a certain Nencio. Next disguised as a somewhat inebriated German manservant with slurred German tones to match, she approaches Nencio and announces that her master, the Marquis of Ripafratta – the title using the name of an ancient town located between Lucca and Pisa - will soon arrive to marry the daughter of a certain Filippo.



Fillipo Fontana as Nanni; Hanna Brammer as Vespina,
disguised as the Marchese

Photo: Rod Millington

And who should arrive next but Vespina once again, in her third disguise as the Marchese himself, confiding to the now-irate Nencio that to avoid marrying below his station he plans to marry Sandrina off to one of his servants. Thus Nencio, exultant at not being the only one duped will join the charade as witness to get even. All this came across in Sarasota with great brio, as a carefully orchestrated burlesque, all characters committed to the exaggerated emotions of the scene. And the audience loved it, as certainly did the audience at Esterháza. After all, this landmark chamber opera of 1773 was one of the first to ignore gods and goddesses, kings and nobility, and to tell the story with simple characters.

The brilliant characterizations persist

The libretto, by important Italian writer, Marco Coltellini, also strongly influenced new directions opera would soon take, expressing the feelings of sympathy for the peasants and lampooning the nobility –attitudes not yet fashionable at the time. And the energetic cast was well up to the task of bringing Haydn’s other brilliant characterizations to life. Tenor David Walton caught the folksy color

and light playfulness of his first aria admonishing his daughter to ignore the suits of Nanni when he comes a wooing, (“Will you wed me? No, sir, no!”) And the other tenor, William Davenport as Nencio was equally compelling in his archetypal Italianate 6/8 serenade outside Sandrina’s window, complete with pizzicato strings imitating a guitar. In this exquisite lampooning of the pitfalls of a city women, “Guardati ben...” (“Beware...”), Mr. Davenport’s wide ranging clarion tenor was perfect for the needs of this delightful parody.



William Davenport as Nencio

Photo: Rod Millington

And in the only minor-key aria of the opera, baritone Filippo Fontana caught the robust anger of Nanni at having to bow to another suitor – indeed in the same key, f minor, and with the same vehemence as Haydn’s *Symphony #49 (La Passione)* just a few years earlier. Concluding with brilliant vocal patter, now in the tonic major, complete with a low F at the end, he effectively apostrophized his rival (“Quello vecchiaccio...” (“Treacherous rascal...”), anticipating indeed Mozart’s Figaro still more than a decade away – and indeed Rossini’s Figaro a few years later, which Mr. Fontana has sung.

As for Sandrina, she eventually emerges as a character more in the *serioso* vein in the penultimate number of the score, still unaware of the conspiracy of the preceding burlesque to insure she marries Nanni, “Che imbroglio è questo!” (“O what a tangled web is this.”) Early in the opera she had been portrayed as a simple peasant girl, at first naive, soon angered. But here, confronted with the prospect of marrying Nencio, she sings an aria of pained resignation, “É la pompa un grand’imbroglio...” (“Luxury is a great burden...”) in which soprano Yulan Piao, with her clear, even

tones, poignantly brought out the beauty of the vocal line - heartrending in its lyricism and power, anticipating Mozart’s Countess in *The Marriage of Figaro*. Similarly it was a memorable, and surprising final moment to a memorable *burletta per musica*, which enthralled in Sarasota in 2024 as much as it certainly had at Esterháza in 1773. After the brief, joyous finale in which all is resolved, the spontaneous standing ovation at both performances I attended said it all: “If you want to hear good opera, come to Sarasota.”