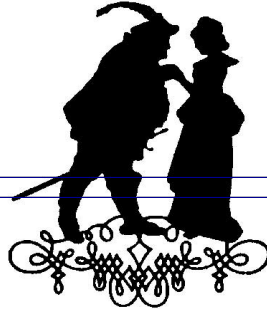


Opera con Brio

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Gounod's *Sapho* Soars in an Intoxicating Performance Washington Concert Opera 2018

The year 2018 marks the 200th anniversary of the birth of Charles Gounod (1818-93), an anniversary which one would have thought the major opera houses in America would have marked with one of his two most popular works, *Faust* or *Romeo et Juliette*. But such seems not to be the case. Rather, at home here in America and abroad, rarities from his diverse output of twelve operas have appeared, mostly in concert form. The Bicentennial year got off to a great start in Munich at the beginning of the year where I was able to catch the modern premiere of his final completed work for stage, *Le tribut de Zamora* (1881) in a single concert performance from The Münchner Rundfunkorchester. The epic sweep and polyphonic grandeur of this archetypal French *grand opera* was a revelation. Another such revelation was the US premiere of *La reine de Saba*, 1862, (The Queen of Sheba), also a compelling work in the *grand opera* mold in a single concert performance by Boston's Odyssey Opera in September.

Moving further afield, Odyssey Opera then presented in early November a rare staging of Gounod's third opera, the delightful Opera Comique *Le médecin malgré lui* of 1858 (*The Doctor in Spite of Himself*), capitalizing on a Molière farce of a century earlier. All things considered, the range and diversity of Gounod was beginning to prove impressive indeed. But it was left to the enterprising Washington Concert Opera just one week later on November 18, to wrap up the anniversary year with the U. S. premiere of his very first opera, *Sapho* (1851, revised in 1884). This brilliant performance of the original 1851 score demonstrated not only that this forgotten work is truly unjustly neglected, but also that the ever-inventive Charles Gounod was destined to become a major force in French opera.

That the young Gounod managed to crack the barrier of the exclusive mid-nineteenth-century opera scene in Paris was thanks to the legendary prima donna of the day, mezzo Pauline Viardot. Gounod was only in his early



Addison Marlor (Phaon), Brian Vu (Alcée), Kate Lindsey (Sapho), Antony Walker (Artistic Director) and Musa Ngqungwana (Pytheas) Photo: Don Lassell

30's and as yet inexperienced in the writing of opera, yet Viardot secured the commission, with a stipulation that she would then sing in the premiere, which she did. No wonder then that WCO would promote this one-night-only US Premiere by highlighting the heroine: "Kate Lindsey is Sapho." And indeed this compelling young mezzo-soprano was just that, delivering a triumphant performance of this legendary Greek poet whose secure, meditative life will disintegrate in the course of the opera as betrayal in love leads her to suicide.

projected an air of waiflike ephemerality befitting the meditative nature of this muse of Lesbos and her reflective poetry. More importantly, her vocal artistry matched the stage presence, generating an evening not soon to be forgotten. The highlight of the first act is her entry in the singing competition of the Olympic Games, a mellifluous ode reciting the history of Héro and Léandre, "Héro sur la tour solitaire" ("Hero on the lonely tower"). Her crisp tone and intuitive musicality easily captured the fluidity of this Gluckian jewel; only in the cabaletta, interwoven with the chorus celebrating her victory, would one have perhaps wished for a bit more depth and heft.



Kate Lindsey (Sapho) takes a bow at the opera's end Photo: Don Lassell

Although the opera was not staged, from the outset this charismatic artist embodied what *Sapho* was all about. Entering first in a glistening one-shoulder gown with long hair draped over the exposed shoulder, she

No matter. By the opera's end, now personifying Sapho's descent into profound melancholy with her more severe hairstyle and austere black dress, Ms. Lindsey delivered her final lament beautifully, the gorgeous "O ma lyre immortelle" ("O my immortal lyre"). Her radiant top notes and nuanced phrasing made for a moving cap to the evening. This aria, as a concert piece, is perhaps the only familiar number from the opera, yet it is so much more effective in context. The wavelike undulations of the orchestra from the outset of the short third act lead inexorably to her final despondent words before leaping into the sea: "Open thy waves, O Deep / In thee now, Sapho seeks eternal sleep." I don't think there was a dry eye in the audience, certainly not mine. In a melancholic rapture, we sink with her into the sea's depths.



Amina Edris (Glycère), Antony Walker (Artistic Director) Kate Lindsey (Sapho)
Photo: Don Lassell

Yet a surprise of the evening was that the opera itself was so much more than a one-woman vehicle. Countering Sapho was her nemesis, Glycère, the courtesan who, both jealous and vengeful that Sapho has stolen her lover, Phaon, stops at nothing to win him back. Her success leads to Sapho's eventual suicide. The striking soprano from New Zealand, Amina Edris, had absolute command of this challenging role from the moment she strode on the stage, exuding sexuality and vigor in her eye-catching red gown. The dramatic highlight of the opera comes mid-Act II in the fiery confrontation between the two women, a truly vicious "cat fight." Glycère blackmails Sapho into letting go of Phaon, threatening to reveal Phaon's complicity in a plot to murder the tyrant Pittacus. Ms. Edris' manipulative posturing complemented her spot-on high notes and runs; Ms. Lindsey held her own, equally animated and engaging, but in the end was no match for her rival. It was all simply breathtaking.

In the next moment, poor duped Phaon enters. Indeed the sweet-toned tenor Addison Marlor captured this role eloquently throughout the night in his emotional journey from lover to one betrayed. In the ensuing trio closing Act II,

he expressively complemented the contending women struggling to claim his love. Next, the opening of Act III was especially affecting as Phaon sings of his misfortunes in love and life, "O jours heureux" ("O happy days"). Nice touches here and elsewhere were a few gentle leaps to high semi-falsetto notes, the kind of effect Gounod certainly would have invited and relished.

Two other male roles important to the plot were handled with aplomb. One was the fine, rich-voiced bass Musa Ngqungwana as Pytheas, the erstwhile companion of Phaon, who Glycère also manipulates in Act II to serve her devious purposes. In their sinuous duet, fraught with irony, he sang with sensitivity and brio, but to no avail as he too loses out in the end. Also outstanding was baritone Brian Vu as Alcée, the competitor in the song contest against Sapho. In Act I, his warm, full voice was perfect for his virile ode of freedom and justice, "Liberté, déesse austère" (Liberty, austere goddess"). Later his stentorian voice was an asset as he headed the plot to assassinate the cruel dictator of Lesbos, Pittacus (whom we never see but who manages to foil the plot against him anyway).



Addison Marlor (Phaon), Antony Walker (Artistic Director) and Musa Ngqungwana (Pytheas)
Photo: Don Lassell

The cast of *Sapho* with Artistic Director Antony Walker

Photo: Don Lassell

As it turns out, *Sapho* was also an ensemble-rich work including a number of fine duets, trios, and a quartet – with ample opportunity for effective choral interjections, as well as an elaborate, rousing first-act finale following the song competition. Some have commented on the relatively static nature of the opera, perhaps focusing on the expository first act and song competition. But it does not remain so. Coincidentally, the intermission following Act I was delayed for the seating of the eminent Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg, operaphile extraordinaire. The audience treated her to a standing ovation, rightly so; then she (and we) experienced an extraordinarily dramatic Act II that really took off – including the two duets and final trio mentioned above. Much credit for the dramatic impetus goes to the almost semi-staged performing context, with protagonists acting their roles, without overdependence on music stands. Added to this were the sound musical forces at hand including not just the soloists and excellent chorus, but also the vibrant WCO orchestra led by Artistic Director Antony Walker. The spontaneous standing ovation at opera’s end was exuberant.

By chance, the night before I had attended *Les Pêcheurs de Perles* (*The Pearl Fishers*) at the Met. Written just twenty years after *Sapho*, this was an early opera by the young Georges Bizet, a work of such sheer lyrical beauty that it has become almost a repertory

staple. Bizet had been a pupil of Gounod, and a comparison of *Sapho* and *The Pearl Fishers* clearly shows how much Gounod influenced the young Bizet. The two operas are similar in several ways: each, for example, involves a mystic heroine by the sea (although with decidedly different outcomes); each contains a tenor/baritone friendship that soon goes awry after a mellifluous duet declaring their eternal brotherhood at the opera’s outset; each includes many subtleties of orchestral color and variety, not to mention exquisite lyricism, that might lead a listener to mistake one for the other.

Gounod’s first operatic effort *Sapho*, both musically and dramatically, even with a slightly awkward libretto, is as effective and appealing as its progeny from Bizet. Thus it was no surprise that leaving the theatre, I heard several versions of “why hasn’t this work been heard more often?” Indeed *Sapho* deserves to be heard more frequently and to be fully staged as well. Kudos to Washington Concert Opera for reviving this worthy piece in such an intoxicating performance.