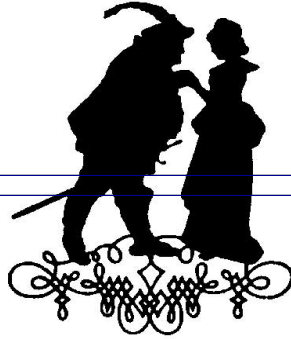


Opera con Brio

Richard B. Beams



Wexford Festival Opera, 2012 A Bountiful Season



Wexford Harbor

Photo: Kathryn Disney

Wexford Festival Opera is perhaps the only festival in the world that consistently prides itself on presenting operatic rarities of all genres, always at the highest of artistic levels. The 2012 season in this attractive southeast coastal town of Ireland was no exception, presenting three works from roughly the same era - the waning days of nineteenth century Romanticism (1887-1907). Spanning three decades, they represented a healthy mix not only of tantalizing rarities but of distinctly varied genres and languages: Emmanuel Chabrier's expansive *opéra comique*, *Le Roi malgré lui* (1887), a treasure-chest of nineteenth century musical riches; Francesco Cilea's taut verismo tragedy, *L'Arlesiana* (1897); and Frederick Delius' poignant, impressionistic Music Drama in Six Scenes, *A Village Romeo and Juliet* (1907), an undeservedly neglected masterpiece. Along with an unusually plentiful array of other concerts, recitals, and the usual ShortWorks, this sixty-first season was a cornucopia of musical delights.

A Village Romeo and Juliet

Among the trilogy of rare productions performed in the 2012 Festival, artistic director David Agler's choice of Frederick Delius' affecting opera was most apt. The performance marked the one hundred and fiftieth anniversary of the composer's birth in 1862, a period in which the likes of such familiar musical giants as Puccini (1858), Mahler (1860), Debussy (1862), and Strauss (1864) also emerged into the world, soon to write music that would transform the musical landscape.

But what happened to Delius and his music? What happened to this opera? As Speight Jenkins wrote on the occasion of the New York City Opera production in 1973, "If the music of *A Village Romeo* is so good, why hasn't it been heard more?"

The answer, he goes on to assert, “may well lie in the inability of the stage before now to live up to what Delius’ music demands.” Sir Thomas Beecham, a ceaseless champion of Delius’ music, who also wrote a biography of him, characterized this music as “poetry in place of rhetoric, sound without uproar, reticence instead of exaggeration.” The 1973 Frank Corsaro production in New York (and Washington) used film projections of non-specific verdant landscapes to create the shadowy, ephemeral world of Delius’ opera. Wexford Festival artistic director David Agler had attended a performance of this illuminating production, as I did also. I’m not sure if he had to wait as long as I did to revisit this beautifully sculpted work, but certainly his faith in the viability of the work contributed to his admirable decision to make it, and Delius himself, a central focus. (The Wexford season also included a showing of Ken Russell’s 1968 biographical film on Delius, *Song of Summer*, on each day the opera was performed; and an additional concert, reviewed below, focused on his songs and chamber music.)

Less is More - An Abstract Production Equal to the Task

The Wexford production and performance did full justice to the unique demands and beauty of the piece. Delius himself recognized how inappropriate realism onstage was for such an opera whose music simply enters the inner world of two young lovers, Sali and Vreli, unable to marry because of a long lasting feud between their fathers over an adjoining piece of land. Kept apart by this absurd quarrel, unable to find happiness in life, they find it only in death - in part a *Tristanesque* yearning for love through death, but more a rejection of a life that contained no possibility of happiness for them. “Realism onstage is nonsense,” Delius once said, “and all the scenery necessary is an impressionistic painted curtain at the back, with the fewest accessories possible.”

Rather than film projections, which in New York had allowed the audience to enter fully into the world that Delius’ music creates for his doomed lovers, Wexford’s appropriate solution from Set Designer Jamie Vartan and Director Stephen Medcalf was an abstract set, opening with a sweeping curve of bare amber wood arching upward at the back of the stage. The strip of land causing the feud between the fathers, Manz and Marti, is barren in the extreme. Accessories were few as well – a large pile of stones center stage defines the disputed field; later a patch of a golden wheat field suggests the opposite, a lush landscape in which the young children, Sali and Vreli, can first admit their love. Telling details dotted the scenes, from a child’s carriage, soon crushed, to the periodic appearance of red poppies, striking amidst the golden wheat. An enigmatic, demonic figure, the Dark Fiddler, the dispossessed owner of the disputed land, appears on several occasions, at one point ominously offering poppies to Vreli in exchange for her broken doll.

The resonant baritone David Stout caught the essence of the malevolent Dark Fiddler, while tenor John Bellemer as Sali and soprano Jessica Muirhead as Vreli made an especially endearing and poignant doomed couple. But as Thomas Beecham suggested, the real “drama” of the work is in Delius’s subtle, impressionistic, and often



David Stout as the Dark Fiddler; Quentin Hayes and Andrew Greenan as the fathers Photo: Clive Barda

understated score. The Wexford Orchestra, under Scotsman Rory Macdonald, wonderfully elicited the delicacy of texture that permeates the score, from the lush descending C Major scale opening the opera, evoking the rural landscape so disputed by the neighboring farmers, to the disquieting violin melody of the Dark Fiddler, to the Straussian



John Bellemer as Sali; Jessica Muirhead as Vreli Photo: Clive Barda

upward leaping theme in the strings first heard early on when Sali urges Vreli not to despair. Things will be all right, he sings, “if we two hold together.” Motives like this, so expressively woven together in Delius’ moving interludes, let the music do what Delius intended – transport the audience to the minds and hearts of the lovers.

“The Walk to the Paradise Garden”

At only one point in this otherwise cohesive production, did the direction undermine the emotive power of this music. Alas this happened in the famous central interlude in the opera, “The Walk to the Paradise Garden,” which of all moments should have transported us to the inner world of the lovers, first recapitulating their lives, then giving special emphasis to the central “Straussian” theme of bonded love. Instead, the activities of the preceding bustling fair lingered through the first half of the famous interlude. A disruptive *pas de deux* by two acrobats was both exhibitionist and totally inappropriate. Eventually (and thankfully) they exited, leaving behind an especially effective vignette showing the two young lovers, transported in a moment of ecstasy, walking in place toward the audience. Finally, as the orchestra soared, we – and they – could linger in the glorious inner world Delius intended. Would that director Steven Medcalf had maintained the appropriate “less is more” approach of the rest of the opera.

The lively fair scene itself, which had opened the second half of the opera with a *commedia dell’arte* clown playfully interacting with the audience, also moved too much in the direction of circus entertainment, since the point of it is rather a reality check for the lovers. But Medcalf redeemed himself in the final scene, catching the essence of the quiet conclusion, an apotheosis of sorts, as the lovers slip quietly beneath the surface of the water. A transparent screen descends from above, illuminating in it fragments from the lovers’ lives. Magically, the audience remained in a stunned silence, as prolonged as I’ve ever experienced in an opera house, bringing to a close what Beecham aptly called “one of the most completely musical stage pieces in the past two generations.”

L’Arlesiana

Complementing this rural tragedy was Cilea’s more visceral tragic tale, *L’Arlesiana*, which also has had few revivals in the last century, despite an immensely successful premiere in 1897 when the young Enrico Caruso first came to prominence. Perhaps the relative obscurity of this taut work, cast in the prevalent verismo mold of three short but increasingly gripping acts, is somewhat justified, especially given the fact that its fame depended much on the tenor’s poignant lament in the second act. Although I would personally have wished that director Rosetta Cucchi had also followed the creed that “less is more,” the Wexford performance and production made a compelling case for the work, which in the end comes across as more than just a tenor’s lament.

The plight of the tenor, Federico, however, is still the opera’s central focus. Another frustrated bridegroom, he descends first into madness and then finally commits suicide. Any parallel to the Delius opera,

however, is only superficial; for one thing, the wished-for union of provincial country lad Federico and the *femme fatale* from Arles is frustrated by more than a mere land feud. It embodies, at least in the original 1872 novella, a fundamental rift in cultures – between an idealized, tradition-filled village in Provence and the more liberal town of Arles. In the opera, the faithlessness of the girl from Arles becomes the basis of Federico’s obsession, from which only death will release him. That she becomes such an obsession is emphasized by the fact that this girl from Arles never appears in the opera! Imagine a Carmen without Carmen on stage!

Psychoanalysis and Expressionism in Verismo

To compensate, Director Rosetta Cucchi gives us the girl from Arles *in extremis*. For better or worse, a simple verismo tale of a provincial young man’s obsession with a bewitching seductress (à la Don Jose and Carmen) becomes an exercise in psychoanalysis and expressionistic symbolism. A vignette at stage left, performed in a claustrophobic black box, prefaces the action of each act. During the overture, three dark figures ominously emerge from the shadows and surround Federico; in the next moment, no sooner has a beautiful woman settled next to him, than another figure appears and slits the woman’s throat. Without the advantage of Bizet’s shattering “fate” motif, this obtrusive vignette was somehow to prepare us for events – or perhaps imagined events – to come.

The menacing vignettes introducing the second and third acts seemed to further portend Federico’s descent into madness and despair. One of the dark figures we now recognize as Federico’s mother, Rosa Mamai, the other, Vivetta, a young village girl (à la Bizet’s Michaela), each of whom spends the opera trying to save Federico from self-destruction. During these vignettes, and through much of the opera, Vivetta cradles a mysterious cage-like black box; during the last scene, following Federico’s suicide (slitting his own throat rather than leaping from the hayloft which the libretto prescribes), she wistfully empties the contents on the ground.



Mariangela Sicilia as Vivetta; Annunziata Vestri as Rosa Mamai
Photo: Clive Barda



Dmitry Golovnin as Federico, plagued by visions of L'Arlesiana
Photo: Clive Barda

Less baffling was the director's decision to have Federico's obsession manifest itself visually by having L'Arlesiana appear not only in the initial vignette of the opera, but also in multiple images that increasingly haunt Federico. They appear in a series of stark windows in the second act until by the third act each member of the female chorus is costumed as an image of L'Arlesiana. (A recent production of Rossini's *Otello* at the Pesaro Rossini Festival did a similar thing with multiple images of Iago emerging one by one from the wings.) Does all this kind of hyperbole enhance or interfere? I'm not sure, but for me it was all rather unnecessary. More effective was to have L'Innocente, the disabled young son of Rosa Mamai, appear dressed as Federico by the end. Clearly the two have switched roles during the opera, one on a path to normalcy, the other on a path to insanity.

Sarah Bacon's inventive sets effectively led the audience through poor Federico's inevitable descent, going from the attractive realistic Provençal house in Act I to an abstract interior wall of an asylum by Act III, thus providing a consistent dramatic focus on the director's concept – which in the end I felt was an effective, if unnecessary, conceit. But at least it did not interfere with the excellent musical forces, beginning with the idiomatic and passionate performance which conductor David Angus elicited from the fine Wexford Festival Orchestra – indeed with the same kind of driving tension we in Boston are used to from this musical director at the Boston Lyric Opera.

The fine if dry Russian tenor Dmitry Golovnin adequately interpreted the central role of Federico. But it was perhaps to Mr. Golovnin's disadvantage that Roberto Recchia, in his insightful and amply illustrated pre-opera lecture, played a legendary recording by Tito

Schipa singing the tenor's famous lament - a hard act to follow. On the other hand, it was the riveting mezzo-soprano Annunziata Vestri as his anguished mother, Rosa Mamai who stole the show with her anguished "Esser madre e un inferno" in the third act. Indeed, the visceral dramatic thrusts of Ms. Vestri powerfully captured the essence of Federico's compelling mother throughout the night. Complementing her, lyric soprano Mariangela Sicilla was equally engaging as the rejected Vivetta. The two excelled in this opera just as they did in their fine Lunchtime Recital earlier in the week, in which Ms. Vestri also exhibited her versatility in roles ranging from Cenerentola to Carmen – the latter a reminder of the seductive sway just a single *femme fatale* can have on the audience.

Le Roi malgré lui

Speaking of Bizet's great tragic opera, has there ever been an *opéra comique* of such sustained popularity? Perhaps not. But for an *opéra comique* of pure musical excellence, top honors may belong to none other than Emmanuel Chabrier's magnificent *Le Roi malgré lui*, soon to follow *Carmen* with a spectacular initial success at the Opéra-Comique of Paris in 1887. Alas the libretto is a spectacular hodgepodge, but this fact in no way detracts from Chabrier's musical inspiration. Maurice Ravel once stated, "I would rather have written *Le Roi malgré lui* than *The Ring of the Nibelung*." Hugh Macdonald, a renowned expert on French opera today, asserts that this seminal work reveals the best of Chabrier's genius, "raising the whole genre of *opéra comique* to heights occupied otherwise only by Bizet's *Carmen* and Massenet's *Manon*."

The landmark 1984 Radio France recording with Charles Dutoit first acquainted me with the music of the opera. Liner notes from that recording assert that "Chabrier's case is the greatest injustice in Music's whole history. For in fact he was the most powerful creator of French music between Berlioz and Debussy, not excluding Bizet. His theatrical works are handicapped by bad librettos; with a better story, *Le Roi Malgré Lui*'s popular success should equal that of *Carmen*; from the purely musical standpoint Chabrier's score is rather better."

This recording, which omits all the troublesome dialogue, attests to the originality and sophistication of this dazzling score. Likewise, right from the shimmering Debussyesque rising ninths of the opera's prelude, experienced French conductor Jean-Luc Tingaud led the Wexford Festival Orchestra in a polished and idiomatic, even thrilling, survey of this effervescent score. The enthusiastic ovations from the audience at the long evening's end gave ample tribute to the succession of musical gems they'd been lucky enough to hear, some twenty or so, over half of them ensembles (often with chorus) as inventive and captivating as one could wish.

Hence it is to the considerable credit of both Wexford Festival Opera and Bard SummerScape at the Fisher Center for the Performing Arts at Bard College, which co-shared this production, that audiences here and abroad had the chance to savor this monumental and neglected

opéra comique. I was able to attend both the Bard premiere on July 27, 2012, and the final performance of the work in Wexford on November 3. Indeed the inspired performance at Wexford, more polished than at Bard, reinforced for me the sustaining quality of the piece.

A Musical Gem, but a Plot Defying Comprehension

But what about the libretto? What about the production, which made a valiant, and to my mind, successful attempt to deal with a plot that defies comprehension? This plot hinges on a king who, not wanting to be king, exchanges his identity with his best friend. Some in the opera know of this deception; many do not. As the plot thickens, with various mistaken identities, conspiracies, disguises and the like, the king joins the conspiracy against himself. At the same time he reconnects with a young woman, Alexina, from Venice – now pregnant – with whom he had once had a brief fling, and who is now married to a trusted, rather buffoonish aide, Fritelli. Meanwhile the king's friend Nangis (as disguised king) hooks up with a beautiful Polish slave girl, Minka, at first a spy for the conspiracy. Eventually, (leaving out a few details) *the King in spite of himself* accepts the crown and all subplots are resolved, sort of.

The point to understand, in defense not of the confusing and over-stuffed plot, but of Wexford's elaborate over-the-top production, is that *Le Roi malgré lui* obviously is not a tragic *opéra comique* like *Carmen*, entertaining but narrowly focused as it moves inevitably toward the dark denouement; rather it is a comic – indeed very comic – *opéra comique*, naturally entertaining, but rambling and disjointed, only loosely focused on the topic at hand (which one even rather loses sight of en route to the finale.) The extensive dialogue (somewhat



Mercedes Arcuri as Minka; Luigi Boccia as Nangis
Photo: Clive Barda



Liam Bonner as Henri Photo: Clive Barda

abridged in this production) functions much like the typically extensive and elaborate recitative in a Metastasio libretto of a Baroque opera – carrying the action forward so that the music, when it returns, can expand on the emotion(s) of the moment, or, particularly in *opéra comique*, on the ensuing dilemma or situation, as elaborate as it may be.

This is where Chabrier is masterful, especially in his captivating twenty or so solos and ensembles, the latter ranging from the exquisite Berlioz-like Nocturne for Alexina and Minka near the end of the opera (lamenting the supposed fate of their respective lovers, the King and Nangris) to the justly famous *Fête Polonaise* that opens the second act. This too is where the directorial team, led by Thaddeus Strassberger, demonstrated how well they understood the genre of *opéra comique*, with its chaotic and nonsensical plot, creating an air of detachment that let the diverse and often flamboyant music spring to life.

More is Sometimes More

The basic concept revolves around the making of a film, perhaps for TV, which in the first two acts an innkeeper, Basile, watches at the right of the stage. (The libretto in fact does not have him appearing until the third act, set in his Inn.) For those who could see him, there was much humor, as he occasionally nodded off. The set itself included multiple accoutrements of the art of filmmaking, from television crew to large storage boxes for equipment, cameras, even to flashing “applause” signs in the second act. The function of this entire



Nathalie Paulin as Alexina; Liam Bonner as the King
Photo: Clive Barda

excessive overlay was cleverly to frame the action, and at the same time to distance us from the characters and their comic excesses. In a way, the whole thing became an engaging kaleidoscopic fantasy. Then the music of Chabrier's inventive score took over.

For example, the pampered sun-worshipping Henri de Valois (resisting from the start becoming king of frigid Poland) makes his first entrance sprawled out on a sun tanning bed; later, in the second act for his exquisite Offenbach-influenced Duet and Barcarolle with his Venetian mistress Alexina, the mode of transportation is (naturally) a large black gondola, complete with gondolier. Is it overkill to have it reappear occasionally? Perhaps. But that's what hyperbole is all about. As needed, other props roll on stage (a grand piano for Minka's poignant lament when she believes Nangis dead) or hover above (a gilded cage for the imprisoned Nangis à la Henri). Clutter abounds with various visual distractions: at one point choristers (usually with cigarettes) pose as maids in sexy, skimpy skirts; at others they wear glittering gowns. Much camera snapping accompanies the display.

But all this meshes well with a cluttered plot, rich in parody as well. The musical gems include: "The Conspirators' Ensemble" (a witty parody of Meyerbeers' "Blessing of the Daggers" from *Les Huguenots*); the aforementioned Barcarolle (à la Offenbach and *The Tales of Hoffman*) and Nocturne for two voices (à la Berlioz's *Beatrice and Benedict*); Fritelli's two comic "Stanzas" (wittily capped with allusions to Berlioz's *Hungarian March*); the "Sextet of Slaves" and Gypsy Song for Minka (reflecting Berlioz's *Queen Mab*); most flamboyant of all, the scintillating "Fête Polonoise" (à la Borodin's

Polovtsian Dances). With such a brilliant overload of musical parody, why should a production not do the same? Usually, I would advocate the creed of "less is more"; but sometimes, more is more. Such is the case with Wexford's (and Bard's) production of Chabrier's sumptuous score.

An Exceptional Cast

The exceptionally fine casting was also no small factor in the production's success. Three principals were held over from the Bard performance: tenor Liam Bonner, with an effective combination of humor and suavity, as Henri; baritone Frederic Goncalves, hearty and bumptious as the Venetian Fritelli, cuckolded by Henri; and expressive soprano Nathalie Paulin as his unfaithful and ambitious wife, Alexina. Ironically this important character has no solo number in the opera, but Ms. Paulin was an especially expressive contributor to three duets and many ensembles. Her chance for solo singing came in her impassioned performance of Britten's moving song cycle, *Les Illuminations*, on the last day of the Festival. The concert was a lesson in French diction and phrasing, expressive and eloquent throughout - a highlight of the Festival indeed. Her refined artistry was no less present in this opera, if a bit obscured.

Two new standouts in the cast for Wexford were soprano Mercedes Arcuri as the lively Polish slave girl Minka and tenor Luigi Boccia as the Comte de Nangis, her lover (and the king's close friend). The two made an especially attractive pair, her brilliant coloratura a fine match for the light, flexible tenor of Mr. Boccia (who the previous day had presented another highlight of the festival in his Lunchtime Recital - see below). Minka is in fact the dominant role in the opera, so attractively penned by Chabrier, from her opening Romance, in which Ms. Arcuri vocalized with astonishing ease, to her famous Gypsy Song, calling on a middle range that would suffice for the most seductive of *femme fatales*. If anyone stole the show, she did; her mellifluous nocturne with Ms. Paulin was a well needed and exquisite respite in the fast-paced opera, as was her following short lament with solo cello, which brought forth all the expressive tenderness of a similar moment in *The Magic Flute* for Pamina.

All the delights of the score, and antics on the stage, are too numerous to recount in full. In sum, it all worked gloriously. The audience roared approval, even after a full three and a half hours. A night to remember and to savor.

But that wasn't all...

Festival Highlights Abound

I had happily anticipated the three main stage productions above, but rarely at any festival have I ever encountered the abundance of stunning musical events, both at the opera house and nearby in diverse venues, that packed these final four days of the festival. To start, there were the usual Lunchtime Recitals at St. Iberius Church, always among the more eagerly anticipated events of the Festival, as well as

the ever-popular ShortWorks, one hour daytime operatic productions sung in English with piano accompaniment. In addition, other daytime concerts and anniversary recitals left hardly a moment to savor any of Wexford's fine restaurants, or even to grab a pint of Guinness.

Lunchtime Recitals

The three noon recitals I attended this year were especially memorable. In one, as mentioned above in the review of Cilia's opera, soprano Mariangela Sicilia and mezzo Annunziata Vestri, the two leads from *L'Arlesiana*, captivated the audience with their vibrant program. In another, soprano Jessica Muirhead, so memorable as Vreli in *A Village Romeo and Juliet*, kept the spirit of Delius alive with an exquisite and nuanced rendering of a song cycle, Op. 41, by Grieg, an early champion of Delius and an important influence on him. She sang the six short songs tracing the travails of young lovers with all the expressive powers she displayed in the opera. The talented violinist David O'Leary joined her in a touching rendering of Strauss's beautiful and famous final song of Op. 27, "Morgen" ("Tomorrow"). In a captivating shift, she brought clarion tone and admirable flexibility to Violetta's famous aria and cabaletta ending Act I of *La Traviata*, her audition number for Wexford, making one wish to hear her soon in that more flamboyant role.

In between these two recitals, on November 2, tenor Luigi Boccia dropped his Comte de Nangis mask, but kept the diverse and collegial spirit of *opéra comique* alive with an especially interesting (and lengthy) program that included eight apprentice artists in an Italian madrigal, a duet from *Il Trovatore* with mezzo Catia Moreso, a favorite Spanish song with tenor Leonel Pinheiro, and a pairing with violinist David O'Leary. Selections for solo voice were diverse as well, ranging from des Grieux's aria from *Manon* and the Irish number, "Down by the Salley Gardens," each showing off an elegant legato line and gorgeous pianissimo tone. Mostly, however, it was the collaborative spirit of colleagues working together – the spirit of Wexford – that came to the fore throughout this enterprising recital. The grand finale reinforced all this with great élan as the audience joined in for a rousing rendition of the "Fundamentals of Irish *Belcanto*" to the tune of "The Rose of Tralee." I skipped lunch just to make the ensuing ShortWork on time.

ShortWorks

A Dinner Engagement by Lennox Berkeley

ShortWorks at Wexford traditionally do one of two things, either present a complete one-act opera, as with *Gianni Schicchi* last year, or an abridged version of a longer work, as was the case with *La Bohème* in 2010. This year Wexford presented one of each: a comic opera in one act by British composer Lennox Berkeley, *A Dinner Engagement*, and an abridged version of Mozart's *The Magic Flute*. Each worked well in the new venue at Presentation Secondary School, although Berkeley's musically slight and mildly entertaining work, which first premiered in the Jubilee Hall at the Aldeburgh Festival in 1954, has



The set and cast of *A Dinner Engagement*

Photo: Clive Barda

little going for it other than that it rubbed shoulders with Aldeburgh and its famous occupant, Benjamin Britten. Be that as it may, the idiomatic set by Kate Guinness, depicting a London kitchen from the 1950's as in the original production, put the comedy in an attractive and appropriate context. The two ideally suited young lovers, tenor Alberto Sousa and soprano Laura Sheerin, overcome the clumsy obstructions of their parents to facilitate meetings and their subsequent engagement. Mezzo Kristin Finnigan effectively portrayed the slapstick cook, Mrs. Kneebone, adding to an afternoon of fun and games, if not lingering memory.

The Magic Flute by Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart

On the other hand, the abridged production of Mozart's ever-engaging *The Magic Flute*, directed by Roberto Recchia, still resonates. Over the years in Wexford, Mr. Recchia's productions, whether one act operas or abridged operas, have always been memorable. His 2008 *Suor Angelica* in the intimate Dun Mhoire Theatre defined for me the power and pathos of Puccini's deceptively slight work. His *Gianni Schicchi* last year, in the spacious but acoustically difficult conference room of White's Hotel, with a mummified Mr. Recchia in bed in the opening scene of Puccini's hilarious buffo work, was just as compelling...and genuinely funny. And his *La Bohème* the year before, reduced to a "pocket opera" of one long act, removed any fears I had that the abridgement would undermine the work's dramatic intent and pathos. And so too with this year's *The Magic Flute*. The fantasy-evoking abridged "family" performance of the opera under the direction of Julie Taymor at the Metropolitan Opera in 2010 reduced the work not to one hour (as advertised), but to a little under two hours. This was the length of the abridgement by Mr. Recchia and music director Andrea Moore, thus retaining (happily) most of Mozart's glorious score, albeit with little of the dialogue.

In contrast to Ms. Taymor's version, it was the element of the "fantastic" that Mr. Recchia eliminated. As he nicely stated in his article, "The dark side of Enlightenment" in the program book, "I kept

silent on all the dragons, ladies, spirits, dancing animals and guards that punctuate the story. Only in a dream can things happen so inconsequentially. Wait a moment: *Flute* can be a dream. Indeed, the dream of a boy (Tamino) in love with a girl (Pamina) whose mother does not agree to their getting married! And in his agitated sleep Tamino dreams, and in his dreams come – transfigured – all the people of his real life.”

And so, powerfully, this is what we get. Designer Kate Guinness simply provides Tamino a bed on which he sleeps as the opera begins; he dreams of rescuing Pamina (attracted it seems to Monosatos). The dream sequence also includes a filmed animation of a monster-snake. From there, we’re off, like Britten in his *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, through the journey of discovery and transformation, as all the people of Tamino’s real life emerge: Papageno, a grocer; Papagena, the florist girl; Monastatos, the bully who is courting Pamina. “In the end,” states the director, “the wisdom of Sarastro wins over the obscurantism of the Queen of the Night.”

In the end too, we are won over, with an effective young cast and a compelling rendition of this forever-endearing work, even with just piano accompaniment (pianist Andrea Grant, expert as always). Vocal highlights were the convincing Nazan Fikret with her clarion sparkle as Queen of the Night; tenor Patrick Hyland, beautifully at ease in the role of Tamino; and, especially, the Pamina of Anna Jeruc-Kopec whose lush, warm soprano made clear that she, for Tamino, was the object of his drama. This *Magic Flute* resonated alongside the many, longer, uncut fully orchestrated versions I have heard. A treat indeed.



Anna Jeruc-Kopec as Pamina; Patrick Hyland as Tamino
Photo: Clive Barda

Two Concerts with Promising Young Pianists

Two other concerts exhibited, among other things, the virtuosic artistry on the piano of two young charismatic performers. The first, on November 3, was a recital in the opera house by the winner of the 2012 Dublin International Piano Competition, the young nineteen-year-old Russian pianist, Nikolay Khozyainov. The extensive program concluded with Franz Liszt’s dazzling Sonata in B minor in which the

young virtuoso fully demonstrated both accomplished technique and dynamic nuance. The encore, Liszt’s expansive and scintillating *Figaro Fantasy* extended the program to such a length that the ensuing Lunchtime Recital at nearby St. Iberius Church had to be held a few minutes, but nobody seemed to mind...except me, who missed lunch.



Nikolay Khozyainov



Alexander Bernstein

The second exhibition of virtuosic pianism came in the orchestral concert the following day, a concert that also included Nathalie Paulin’s stunning performance of a song cycle by Britten, *Les Illuminations* (mentioned above). In this case the pianist was the talented young American Alexander Bernstein. With conductor David Angus, strings and virtuoso trumpeter Dan Newell, he gave a visceral and compelling reading of Shostakovich’s exuberant Concerto for Piano, Trumpet and Strings, Op. 35.

Two Anniversary Recitals

As if this weren’t enough, two exquisite daytime “anniversary” recitals in the Jerome Hynes Theater were for me the non-operatic treats of the Festival: one, an unanticipated delight, expanded on the Delius anniversary year with a program titled “Delius and The American,” songs of Delius, Samuel Barber and their contemporaries; the other, an eagerly anticipated recital of songs and piano music, celebrated the bicentenary of the birth of Irish-born composer William Vincent Wallace (1812-1865).

A Tribute to Delius

The Delius concert on November 1 (followed later in the day by the biographical film *Song of Summer* and later that evening by his opera) gave ample evidence of why Sir Thomas Beecham once called Frederick Delius “the last great apostle in our time of romance, emotion, and beauty in music.” It also provided the opportunity for individual apprentice artists of the Festival to shine in solo moments – which indeed they did, presenting various lyrical songs mostly of both Delius and Samuel Barber with the alternating accompaniment of the two always dependable pianists, Adam Burnette and Andrea Grant. Among the Delius songs, English soprano Jennifer Witton wonderfully captured the haunting refrain of “Irmelin” (“Irmelin rose, Irmelin sun, Irmelin loveliest of all!”), while Scottish soprano, Aimee Toshney brought out the amber glow of another refrain which caps each stanza of the song “Autumn” (“No one knows where to!”) The engaging English tenor Lawrence Thackeray presented two impassioned Shelley songs, “Love’s Philosophy” and “To the Queen of my Heart,” characterized by waltzing lyricism.

A special treat also came from a talented young string quartet assembled for the occasion. Alas there was only time for the first movement of the Delius String Quartet, “With animation.” This expressive movement, with its warm glow of gentle lyricism, brought to mind immediately the equally gorgeous sextet that opens Strauss’s final opera, the “conversation piece” *Capriccio*. One only wished to have heard the complete quartet, especially the third movement, essentially a complement to the first, with its typical Delius markings, “Late Swallows: slow and wistfully.”

Be that as it may, the audience was immediately compensated when next, baritone Simon Robinson (whom I’ve had the good fortune to hear at the Innsbruck Early Music Festival) gave a stirring account of one of Barber’s best known pieces, his 1851 setting of Matthew Arnold’s poem *Dover Beach* for voice and string quartet. Program annotator Sarah Burn rightly points out that the song “exploits the qualities of a string quartet to convey the ebb and flow of the sea: ‘the grating roar / of pebbles which the waves draw back’ and ‘the turbid ebb, and flow / of human misery.’” As with Delius, the voices of nature filter through to illuminate text at all times.

A Tribute to William Wallace

On the following day, in a concert of works by William Wallace, a pair of engaging artists, pianist Una Hunt and mezzo-soprano Rachel Kelly, captivated an eager, standing-room only audience with an exuberant recital of drawing room music with which Wallace had such success, especially in America. Indeed the *New York Times* advertised his 1854 American Music Album as a “must have gift for Christmas 1853... This is unquestionably one of the handsomest gift books of the season...we cannot conceive of a more graceful and elegant offering to the ladies of the United States.” (A limited edition facsimile of the album, with CD, was available for sale after the performance.)

Most memorable for me was Ms. Kelly’s subtly expressive delivery of *The Seasons*, four songs which, as in Vivaldi’s famous work of the same title, suggest a metaphor for the journey through life: “The joyful, joyful Spring”; “It is the happy Summer time”; “The leaves are turning red”; “The Spring and Summer both are past.” Gracing the cover of the program were the delightful female images representing the four seasons from the 1854 Album.

The concert itself was a revelation, a chance to savor Wallace’s intimate, mellifluous vocal music, an apt complement indeed to the surge in popularity of *bel canto* across the ocean with the likes of Bellini and Donizetti. Included also were arias from Wallace’s Grand Opera, *Maritana*, his greatest operatic triumph, written for London in 1845. Hearing one of the most popular arias from this opera, “Scenes that are Brightest,” (as well as the romance “Tis the harp in the Air”) made me wish that Wexford Festival Opera would soon pay proper homage to this important Irish composer with a performance of this neglected work, full of such youthful spontaneity and tunefulness.

Cabaret Coda

Little was I prepared for the fact that this 11 AM concert of Wallace songs was merely the prelude to a day that continued next with the extensive Luigi Bocca Lunchtime Recital, the ShortWork afternoon performance of *The Magic Flute*, the main stage performance of *L’Arlesiana* (with its pre-opera lecture) and finally, twelve hours later, seeming to mirror the over-kill of an elaborate *opéra comique*, yet one more concert - The Grand Tango Quartet of Dublin at 11 PM in the now Cabaret-converted space of the Jerome Hynes Theater. My fears (and exhaustion) dissolved, however, as they charted the history of tango from the 1900s to the present day in a beguiling concert, “relaxing and hypnotic,” that indeed whisked me back to a Tango Club in Buenos Aires where I’d spent an invigorating evening just one month earlier.

Shortly after midnight when I emerged into the crisp night air, I was happily reminded, however, that this was Wexford, where a Festival season is almost always a cornucopia of delights. My bet is next year will be the same. Meanwhile, it was time for a Guinness.

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Wexford at night