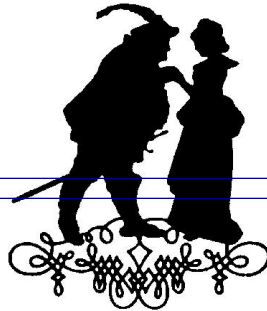


Opera con Brio

Richard B. Beams



A Worthy Season at Wexford Wexford Festival Opera, 2013

The Wexford Festival Opera 2013 season, with a combination of deserving but rarely-performed operas, diverse and appealing ShortWorks, and noon concerts, once again made the journey to this delightful town on the southeast coast of Ireland a visit to savor. The main stage operas, performed in the acoustically friendly 780-seat opera house, followed a typical Wexford Opera formula: rare nineteenth-century French and Italian works, complemented by a twentieth-century work, often American, but in this case, Italian. The offerings included the little known Historical-Lyrical Drama *Cristina, Regina di Svezia* by the practically unheard of Verdi contemporary, Jacopo Foroni (1824-1858); a pair of short operas by Massenet, the veristic *La Navarraise* and *Thérèse*; and Nino Rota's lively mid-twentieth-century comic jewel, *Il Cappello di paglia di Firenze* (*The Florentine Straw Hat*).

Cristina, Regina di Svezia

One is never sure which of the Festival's works, if any, will become the runaway smash hit of the season. Four years ago (in 2009) it was Donizetti's poignant tragic opera *Maria Padilla*, many thanks to the talented Boston-based soprano, Barbara Quintiliani; and two years ago (in 2011), it was the gripping contemporary opera *Maria* by Polish composer Roman Statkowski, aided by another Verdian soprano, Daria Masiero, in the title role. This year, in spite of the appeal of the frothy operetta *The Florentine Straw Hat*, the runaway hit was *Cristina*, which



Helena Dix as Cristina Photo: Clive Barda

left Wexford audiences wildly enthusiastic, many wondering where in the world this opera had been. The opera's success, as with the "hits" of previous seasons, was certainly aided by having a compelling soprano, Helena Dix, in the title role as the determined Swedish queen Cristina; but the success was as much a product of all involved with this updated production in which Director Stephen Medcalf masterfully realized this mellifluous and appealing score.

As with many a nineteenth-century Italian melodrama, Foroni's work is rooted in historical fact, in this case, the period of the seventeenth-century Thirty Years War between Lutherans and Catholics. The real life Cristina (1625-1689) was a strong ruler who never married, often dressed in male attire, and abdicated in 1654, moving to Rome thereafter. En route, in Innsbruck, she converted from Protestant Lutheranism to Roman Catholicism, much to the delight of those in Rome. Once there she continued to be the enthusiastic patroness of the arts she had been in Sweden, supporting among other things the operas of Alessandro Scarlatti (who in turn would have such a lasting influence on Handel). Medcalf updates the production from the seventeenth century to the 1930's in England, suggesting parallels between Cristina's abdication in 1654 and Edward VIII's abdication in 1936. Medcalf further reinforces the twentieth-century parallels through old newsreel clips shown on a large screen above the stage, one, for example, in which Neville Chamberlain proclaims "peace for our time," waving the paper proclaiming the Munich Agreement.

Notably, the production of *Maria* in 2011 involved a similar updating, moving the story from a seventeenth-century conflict between the Tartars and the Ukrainian Poles to the twentieth-century struggle between pro-democracy forces (Glasnost/Solidarity) and Communists. In that production also, many film projections brought the disturbing struggle to life, so much so that the Polish ambassador to Ireland who attended the opera and was active in the uprising felt it too soon for such a production to make its way back to Poland. Medcalf's use of films, however, simply served to universalize Cristina's situation, at times adding a lighter touch. For example, Carlo Gustavo, who loves the queen although unloved in return, and who will eventually succeed her as king, arrives by parachute, following a video clip of wartime parachutists, to rescue her from a conspiracy. At any rate, while all this may not have provided quite the contemporary bite of *Maria*, it did not interfere and at least enhanced the sense of urgency implicit in the sometimes-diffuse plot line.

Musically, the performance complemented the dramatic side of things. Ms. Dix, imposing and regal in the role, commanded a large voice easily able to handle the many ensembles. The



Lucia Cirillo as Maria Eufrosina in *Cristina* Photo: Clive Barda

outstanding chorus was often thrilling in itself, under the capable direction of Errol Girdlestone. Baritone Igor Golovatenko as Carlo also stood out with a resonant tone worthy of the most difficult Verdi and Donizetti roles. Let's hope he returns to Wexford in one of them. Equally effective - indeed a most engaging singing actress - was the attractive mezzo Lucia Cirillo as Maria Eufrosina, Cristina's rival, who eventually joins the conspiracy against her. What a shame (indeed perhaps a structural flaw of the opera) that she virtually disappears after the first act, except for brief ensemble work in the final act. Perhaps, she too will return to Wexford in one of the Rossini/ Bellini/ Donizetti roles for which she seems so well suited. Singers in secondary roles were also effective, especially tenor Patrick Hyland and baritone David Stout as the two conspirators, and the Wexford Festival orchestra seemed especially energized under the excellent English conductor Andrew Greenwood.

In the end, one wonders what has kept this superb opera off the boards for so long. Ironically, Foroni's life choice was opposite to that of the Queen of Sweden, whom he so aptly portrayed. In 1848 he fled Milan following the failed uprisings, settling in Sweden where he composed *Cristina* the following year. His famous contemporary Verdi, as much a patriot, would remain in Italy - shifting gears, no longer writing fiery *Risorgimento* operas but works about such outsiders as a deformed hunchback (*Rigoletto*) and an ostracized courtesan (Violetta in *La Traviata*). Fame for Verdi naturally grew of course. But Sweden was outside the sweep of European culture. Verdi would live out the century; Foroni, on the other hand, would die from cholera in 1858 at age thirty-three, his most important opera soon forgotten. Our thanks to Wexford Opera therefore for keeping his name alive, and for presenting this compelling work with such vigor. Cheers from the audience were warranted in every way.

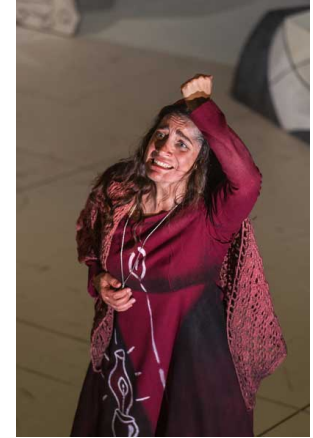
A Massenet double bill: *Thérèse* and *La Navarraise*

Unlike Jacopo Foroni, the name Jules Massenet (1842-1912) is well known, even though shortly after his death many of his some two-dozen operas fell into oblivion when his richly melodic and nuanced style went out of fashion. Yet Massenet has been the most frequently performed opera composer at Wexford, next to Donizetti and Rossini, and the company deserves some considerable credit for being at the forefront of the revival of his operas that has taken place since the 1970's. Works performed range from the now well known *Thaïs* and *Cendrillon*, to the erotic Grand Opera *Herodiade*, to the more intimate *Le Jongleur de Notre Dame*, unique with its all-male cast. Now with its seventh and eighth offerings from this eclectic and often underrated composer, the veristic *Thérèse* and *La Navarraise* (*The Girl from Navarre*), Wexford Opera put together a stunning evening of music theatre.

While period black and white silent film had provided the backbone to the concept in *Cristina*, the production team for this double bill (Director Renaud Doucet and Designer André Barbe) sought to relate each opera to art works appropriate to the story. The background for *Thérèse* is the Reign of Terror following the French Revolution, in which Thérèse and her husband André Thorel, a Girondist, will eventually face the guillotine. The production team thus placed the opera in an art restoration laboratory, in which large paintings slid in and out on panels – one *The Death of Marat* by J. L. David. The principals, dressed in period costumes, moved in and out as well. The production note explained: “like the artist, we use Life as our subject matter. Art has to be grounded in the real world and we must enhance our ways of seeing.” Perhaps more effectively realized, *La Navarraise*, which is set in Spain during the third Carlist War in the 1870's, offered a new slant on the verismo credo of presenting a “slice of life.” Here fragments of Picasso's *Guernica* appeared around the stage, reflecting the psychological fragmentation of the destitute heroine and the ravages of ongoing war that eventually drive her to madness. The climax was overwhelming.



Brian Mulligan in *La Navarraise* Photo: Clive Barda



Left: Brian Mulligan and Nora Sourouzian in *Thérèse*
Right: Nora Sourouzian in *La Navarraise*
Photos: Clive Barda

But what really held the evening together was the artistry of the remarkable Canadian singing actress, mezzo-soprano Nora Sourouzian. She so captured the essence of the two very different heroines that it was indeed hard to believe the same women portrayed both protagonists. Thérèse, as the beautiful young wife of Andre Thorel (a baritone), is eloquently coiffed in an empire gown (based on the portrait in the large David painting). Her conflict involves her lingering affection for a former lover. By contrast Anita (*La Navarraise*) is a disheveled peasant girl, madly in love with a soldier, Araquil (a tenor), but unable to marry him because of objections from his wealthy father, Remigio (a bass). She eventually succumbs to spine chilling madness when her plan to win him backfires. Ms. Sourouzian was commanding in both roles, the first more like Tosca, with expressive moments of subdued passion; the second, more like Carmen, with raw emotion often erupting.

Members of the supporting casts were also effective in their diverse roles. A number of them shared duties in both operas: tenor Philippe Do, first the refined Armand de Clerval, the conflicted former lover to Thérèse, later the distraught soldier Araquil; baritone Brian Mulligan, with an abrupt shift from the restrained husband, André Thorel, in the first work to the agitated military commander, Garrido, in the second work; and bass Damien Pass in a pair of

minor roles, the second critical as Remigio, the stern father to Anita. Notably, later in the week this fine Australian bass exhibited a wonderfully honeyed tone in his varied Lunchtime Recital, capped with a delightful “Waltzing Matilda.”

The emphasis on supporting characters is a reminder of the myriad contributing elements, on the stage and in the pit, which must come together to bring operas like this effectively to stage. I had heard both works in recordings, but was not particularly impressed or moved by either. On stage at Wexford, they were electrifying. The fine orchestra, this time led by the young Spanish-Venezuelan Carlos Izcaray, was a prime factor in this. Performing verismo opera is tricky, demanding control of the explosive fury smoldering beneath the surface. Maestro Izcaray built the tension masterfully, providing space as well for Massenet the melodist and subtle orchestrator. In sum, the evening represented a rather carefully controlled crescendo with the climatic moments exploding like fireworks; by the end, the audience left about as shattered as the poor girl from Navarre. It was quite a night.



The cast of *Il Cappello di paglia di Firenze*

Photo: Clive Barda

Il Cappello di paglia di Firenze

There could hardly be more contrast to Massenet’s tragic verismo operas than Nino Rota’s hilarious farce, *Il Cappello di paglia di Firenze* (*The Italian Straw Hat*), with a plot that is about as ridiculous as possible and a frenetic pacing that leaves you breathless rather than traumatized. Imagine a plot that evolves, as illogically as possible, from a horse eating a straw

hat. Imagine too music mostly plagiarized or recycled. Imagine finally that all this moves along at such a fast pace that you scarcely have time to think how silly it all is. Stir, and put on stage at the Wexford Opera house. You have a delightful concoction, the perfect antidote to verismo passion and trauma: *Il Cappello di paglia di Firenze*.

Nino Rota (1911-1979) was primarily known for his numerous film scores, as the always-informative (and entertaining) pre-opera lecturer Roberto Recchia reminded his audience. These included several Fellini films (*La strada*, *La dolce vita*, and *Amarcord*), and the first two *Godfather* films, among over one hundred fifty others. *Il Cappello di paglia di Firenze*, written at mid-century, is perhaps the best-known opera, which brilliantly parodies music from numerous well-known opera scores as well as his own films. One can have great fun during a performance playing “name that tune,” with excerpts from the like of Wagner (*The Ride of the Valkyries*), or Strauss (waltzes from *Der Rosenkavalier*), or samples of Puccini and Rossini ingeniously woven into the score.

The lively production, directed by Andrea Cigni, caught well the amalgamated brio of this experienced writer of film music and recycled tunes. She moved the action from the late nineteenth century to the time of the opera’s premiere in mid-twentieth-century; Designer Lorenzo Cutùli created a raked set in the shape of a French postage stamp, surrounded by large French show posters. Trap doors abounded to facilitate all sorts of unexpected entrances and exits. The exaggerated fifty’s costumes made a colorful assortment, wonderfully suited to the buoyant, non-stop action that overran the stage area, as characters popped in and out from nowhere. The rapid-fire activity and direction well suited a composer whose work was so influenced by the rhythm of the cinema.

Among the many fine singers was Irish soprano Claudia Boyle, familiar to the Wexford audience from her brilliant performance two years ago as the Comtesse in *La Cour de Célimène*. Recently I had heard her also at the Komische Opera Berlin as Mozart’s Konstanza. The tasteless nonsense surrounding her in that cluttered production of *The Abduction from the Seraglio* must have helped her deal with her role as Elena in this action-filled production. As always, her clarion coloratura was seemingly effortless, here as this naïve bride-to-be. Deserving special mention was the wonderful “Rossinian” tenor Filippo Adami as Fadinard, husband-to-be of



Claudia Boyle as Elena and Salvatore Salvaggio as Nonancourt in *Il Cappello di paglia di Firenze*
Photo: Clive Barda

Elena, who spends the opera in search of a replacement for the straw hat. In his Lunchtime Recital a few days later, Mr. Adami further charmed with Neapolitan favorites as well as songs from his native Tuscany.

Other standouts in the large cast were Turkish mezzo-soprano Asude Karayavuz as La Baronessa, bass-baritone Filippo Fontana as a particularly hilarious Beaupertuis, husband to Anaide, and Australian soprano Eleanor Lyons as Anaide, the flighty owner of the devoured straw hat. Displaying admirable diversity, Ms. Lyons later presented a Lunchtime Recital featuring Russian songs, and Ms. Karayavuz gave a particularly full and diverse Lunchtime Recital, including a meticulously ornamented “cruda sorte” from Rossini’s *L’Italiana*, a teasing and lively “habanera” from *Carmen*, as well as numerous and varied folk tunes from southern Spain and elsewhere.

Other fine contributions from the talented cast are too numerous to mention. Suffice it to add that once again the Wexford orchestra under the able direction of Sergio Alapont helped give the piece a kind of sparkling and captivating directness reminiscent of nineteenth-century operetta and vaudeville. My colleague Charles Jernigan has reminded me of Henri Bergson’s famous essay “Laughter,” which demonstrates that comedy is like a machine, which once set in motion, moves of its accord. In this case the eating the straw hat by Fadinard’s horse sets the machine off, and nothing will stop the “jack-in-the-box” like reactions of the characters until the hat (or at least a hat) is produced again. The ever-buoyant vitality of the orchestra, driving the frenetic action on stage, kept the machine well oiled, right to the last note (or straw, as it were).

ShortWorks

Traditionally, Wexford’s ShortWorks provide a welcome opportunity for opera goers to experience, at reduced prices, both shorter versions of well-known repertory operas as well as full versions of contemporary and/or lesser known short operas, usually with full staging but only piano accompaniment. This year’s ample offering included four works, a pair in each of the two categories. In the first were Donizetti’s ever green *L’elisir d’amore* (indeed in 1952, the first of his many works to be presented at Wexford) and, as a nod to the Verdi bicentennial, Verdi’s ever-popular *La Traviata*, presented just once at Wexford in 1965. In the second category, each relatively unknown, were Irish composer William Balfe’s one act operetta *The Sleeping Queen* of 1864 and contemporary American composer Richard Wargo’s *Losers*, receiving its Irish premier in Wexford.

Two popular Italian operas reduced: *La Traviata* and *L’elisir d’amore*

Alas the attempt to perform the reduced, semi-staged *Traviata* in Jerome Hynes Theatre (an annex to the Opera House itself) was not very successful. The steeply raked intimate space is wonderful for lectures and chamber recitals, perhaps even a chamber opera. But its lively acoustics little served the Violetta of Polish soprano Anna Jeruc-Kopec, whose impassioned, but occasionally shrill tones acquired an unsettling resonance. All this overshadowed whatever fleeting moments of subtlety she exhibited. Nor did the stark staging help in the blackened auditorium. Director Stefania Panighini wrote in the notes of Violetta’s “quest for freedom” as a “long



Anna Jeruc-Kopec as Violetta in *La Traviata*
Photo: Paula Malone-Carty

and anguished journey.” On the dark stage this meant a “cats cradle” web of stark white threads from which poor Violetta could not extricate herself. It was all more disruptive than effective, and I couldn’t wait myself for freedom from this colorless production and the claustrophobic black box. Perhaps that was the point.

On the other hand, three of the four ShortWork performances were successfully staged in the venue that now seems to be working well for such works, the accommodating auditorium of Presentation Secondary School, just a short walk up from the opera house. Happily, the other well-known and abbreviated Italian work, *L’elisir d’amore* was a delight in every way. I was not surprised, for I have learned over the years that whenever Roberto Recchia directs a ShortWork at Wexford, the audience is in for a treat, whether it is an abbreviated one act piece, like his *Suor Angelica* of 2005, which still remains for me the most compelling production I’ve ever attended of this dangerously static piece – or a more recent *Gianni Schicchi* in which Mr. Recchia himself, as the disguised newly deceased, set the machine of comedy rolling. The *L’elisir* of this season was no exception, reinforcing my sense that at Wexford, the familiarity of operas performed as ShortWorks should not keep one from going. Rather, especially with Mr. Recchia’s flare for Italian comedy, it is even more reason for attending.

As always, Mr. Recchia was a master of detail, aided in this case by meticulous set designer Sarah Bacon. We find ourselves in Adina’s bar, where at the outset there is a karaoke evening in which Gianetta (with chorus) sings the opening number. Nemorino is a waiter at the bar; Belcore, an officer, checks on the closing hours. Video projections, a favorite Recchia device, play a major role, as they did in his *Magic Flute* last year and even way back in his *Suor Angelica*. They always add touches that are appropriate but do not interfere. Above the bar, for example, a TV projects banal programs much of the time; but when word comes of Nemorino’s inheritance, the big news gets runaway coverage.

The young cast was a delight as well. Thomas Faulkner as the quack Dulcamara exhibited an entertaining flair for comedy, with an agile buffo voice effectively juxtaposed against the myriad video gags at his entrance aria “Udite, udite, o rustici.” Baritone Ian Beadle presented a wonderfully comic and macho Belcore as well; and tenor Patrick Hyland rightly brought the most applause of the afternoon with an especially expressive “Una furtiva lagrima.” That said, the Adina of soprano Jennifer Davis was a sheer delight in every way, evoking both



Jennifer Davis as Adina in *L’elisir d’amore*
Photo: Paula Malone-Carty

an air of the minx and endless charm, with confident upper tones that kept the audience – and Nemorino – enthralled. As expected, it turned out to be an enchanting ninety minutes of opera theatre.



Patrick Hyland as Nemorino in *L’elisir d’amore*
Photo: Paula Malone-Carty

Two one act operas: *The Sleeping Queen* and *Losers*

Of the two works presented in their entirety, Wargo's *Losers* was by far the more successful and interesting. Still, it was a commendable nod to Ireland's most famous nineteenth-century composer, William Balfe (1808-1870), for Wexford to present *The Sleeping Queen*, a rather slight operetta (sometimes called a "cantata"), especially since his opera *The Rose of Castile* had opened the very first Wexford Festival in 1951. Even so, director Sophie Motley felt that Balfe was so unknown in his native Ireland that she had the four soloists appear in front of the curtain presenting a kind of prelude, entertainingly filling the audience in as to who in the world he was. Suffice it to say, he wrote twenty-eight operas and was once so popular that he and his most famous opera *The Bohemian Girl* were household names. (One member of the quartet before the curtain playfully connected the title with the name of a hairdresser's salon in Wexford!)



Ronan Busfield as Philippe D'Aguilar and Johane Ansell as Maria Dolores in *The Sleeping Queen*
Photo: Paula Malone-Carty

This set the tone for the rather insubstantial work itself, playful indeed. It is all a rather silly story of a teen-age queen in seventeenth-century Spain and a law demanding the death of anyone who kisses her. Of course a young man does, and the plot runs on, with a comic villain and all. Balfe originally wrote the work for four singers, piano and harmonium; later he reworked it as a full-length operetta with chorus and orchestra. Perhaps the fuller version would have been more interesting, but at least the four young singers effectively brought the work before the audience they had earlier instructed. The gentle

voiced Irish-Canadian soprano Johane Ansell played the queen with appealing girlish charm which contrasted nicely with the dark timbre of her maid, mezzo Christina Gill; the melancholic light tenor of Ronan Busfield was a nice complement to the queen he loves, while the second tenor Padraic Rowan effectively rounded out the quartet as the mildly malicious and comic regent, eventually foiled by the two women. The audience responded at the end with appropriate applause, but leaving the theater one wished for tunes a bit more memorable, a plot a bit heftier. There is certainly more substantial Balfe for Wexford to explore.

Richard Wargo's *Losers* is actually the second of two short operas that comprise his *Ballymore: Winners and Losers*. The second opera comes across on stage as a work so compelling that one hopes Wexford will eventually bring the full work to life on its main stage. The complete work premiered at Milwaukee's Skylight Opera in 1999, and Wexford performed the Irish premiere of *Winners* as a ShortWork in 2010, where it was received as enthusiastically

as the performance I attended in Boston a few years earlier. The two parts tell unrelated stories of two couples in which their love is encumbered by circumstances surrounding their lives. In *Winners*, the unwedded young lovers, a pregnant Mag and Joe conclude a fleeting happy day together with a boat trip that ends in death. In *Losers*, the young couple, Andy and Hanna, having drifted apart early on in the opera, ends up staying together by subordinating themselves to the stern and repressive religiosity of her mother. The question lingers at the close of each work: Who really wins? Who loses?

Wargo's witty score for *Losers* is truly infectious. With the slightest of touches it captures the essence of a character's emotions, as with Hanna's percussive scraping of her mother's burnt toast early in the opera, or the touch of ironic humor in the chorale-like passage accompanying the adoration of St. Philomena. The miracle-working saint, Philomena was a martyr around whom in a way the story turns since she dedicated herself to remaining a virgin, and gave the "weaker sex the strength to face martyrdom." And the talented young cast was truly up to the task, vocally and dramatically. Eleanor Lyons was appropriately sour as the "long suffering" invalid mother

who pulls at all the heartstrings. Cátia Moresco, with a rich mezzo voice, effectively caught the unhappy Hanna's nagging inner conflict over allegiance to mother or husband. Meanwhile the mild baritone of Nicholas Morris seemed to reflect his failed attempt to live with Hanna but without her possessive mother. Rightly, all were met with rapturous applause from the appreciative audience at the performance's end.

The entertaining work is an exercise in irony and black humor. Designer Sarah Bacon's oppressive double-tiered set emphasized these elements, with the mother's bedroom at the second level all pervasive over the shabby living area that Hanna occupies. Images of saints abound as well. The appropriately claustrophobic set was notably in sharp contrast to the set for *Winners* of two years ago, in which a light, airy hill overlooked the beckoning water and blue sky. One can only hope that Wexford Festival Opera, having successfully given two halves of this carefully sculpted opera as ShortWorks, will soon give the complete two-part work a full production on center stage. They'd have a "winner" indeed!

Looking Ahead

Meanwhile the announced operas for next year promise more rare works, again following the typical Wexford formula: a mid-nineteenth-century Donizetti-like "melodrama semiserio," *Don Bucefalo*, by another obscure Italian composer, Antonio Cagnoni; a Debussyesque French *Salome*, not by Strauss but by his contemporary Antoine Mariotte, a work that briefly caused a lawsuit between the two composers; and the tautly paced American opera *Silent Night* by Kevin Puts, based on the 2005 French film *Joyeux Noel*, that played a sold-out premiere run in 2011 at the Minnesota Opera and went on to win the 2012 Pulitzer Prize for music. Bets are 2014 will be another worthy season in Wexford.

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Cátia Moresco as Hanna Wilson Tracy and Nicholas Morris as Andy Tracy in *Losers*
Photo: Paula Malone-Carty