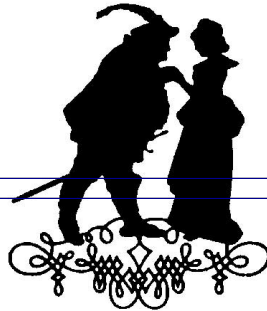


Opera con Brio

Richard B. Beams



Wexford Festival Opera, 2015 A Season of Discoveries

Wexford Festival Opera may perhaps be the only major opera festival in the world that has solidly built its reputation on performing lesser-known works, typically works unjustly neglected and/or rarely performed. Such was its mission right from the outset in 1951, and the miracle as the curtain came down on its sixty-fourth season is the continued success of such an endeavor in this small seaside town on the east coast of Ireland. The Festival was entirely sold out, with lengthy waiting lists for tickets for the three main evening operas: *Koanga* by British composer Frederick Delius (1862-1934), the first opera ever written about African-Americans; *Guglielmo Ratcliff* by the young Pietro Mascagni (1863-1945), an impassioned opera that stretches the limits of verismo; and *Le Pré aux clercs* by Ferdinand Hérold (1791-1833), one of the more successful *opéra comiques* ever written.

There was certainly good reason for the demand on tickets; these diverse works were three of the most successful productions I have ever experienced at Wexford in a single season. As Michael Gieleta, Director of *Koanga*, stated in the program:



The Wexford Opera House
Photo: Ros Kavanagh

One of the joys of directing non-canonical operas is the absence of the imminent pressure to make one's mark by a 'novel' approach to well-known material. In Wexford a director becomes the conduit between an arcane opera and an unbiased audience.

Indeed, imaginative but appropriate productions were a part of the season's success. Another component was well articulated by Wexford's artistic director, David Agler, at the awards ceremony following the final performance of the season: "Wexford

has always prided itself on discoveries, whether it be repertoire or singers. Providing a platform for the best emerging talent of the national and international stage is a key part of the Wexford Festival Opera mission.” Happily, the 2015 season was just such a season of discoveries - of operas and performers alike.

Koanga - A Tale of Two Worlds

First in line was the opera that opened the 64th Wexford Festival Opera season, Delius’ moving tale of a proud African prince who, sold into slavery in Louisiana, falls in love with the beautiful mulatto maid, Palmyra, with tragic consequences. On the surface this may sound like simply a variation of the archetypal doomed-lovers plot of Delius’ later opera, *A Village Romeo and Juliet*, given a critically acclaimed production at Wexford just three years ago in 2012. Although each score has a certain Wagnerian taint, the differences are significant, not only in the dark grandeur that pervades this score, but also in the groundbreaking use of African-American music and characters, supporting a story line that includes the voodoo magic of this betrayed prince to recapture his lost identity and seek revenge on the plantation owners. David Agler, an ardent admirer of Delius, must have known the beauty of this neglected work, and he, along with the Delius Trust, deserves much credit for helping Wexford bring it to the stage.

For me, unable to obtain a copy of the 2005 EMI recording of *Koanga* before hand, the opera was a revelation, a captivating mixture of African and African-American melodies and rhythms with some rich Wagnerian orchestral textures and exquisite choral writing. The opera begins with a haunting plantation song, most likely reminiscent of music Delius had heard working in the early 19th century running a Florida orange plantation. Songs often emerged nostalgically from expressive off-stage choruses, of which Delius was especially fond. Plentiful Wagnerian orchestral passages, played with such warmth by the Festival Orchestra under the fine direction of conductor Stephen Barlow, created tableaux of restrained, impressionistic beauty. Balancing such moments were those like the injection of vitality from the well-known African-Caribbean dance *La*



Aubrey Allicock (Uncle Joe) and The Cast of *Koanga*
Photo: Clive Barda

Calinda performed at the abortive wedding of *Koanga* and Palmyra. A pair of on-stage banjos supplemented the orchestra, indeed well ahead of its time (forty years before Gershwin’s *Porgy and Bess*).

To be sure, although musically fascinating, *Koanga* is dramatically flawed, with a libretto giving little insight into motivation and providing little opportunity for character development. Hence it is even more to the credit of director Michael Gioleta and his largely South African production team that the opera emerged with such success. James Macnamara’s blank, white-box set first fills with a group of curious young people as Uncle Joe begins the story of *Koanga*. Gradually, with the first of many rich orchestral pictures, the set fills with colorful projections suggesting a moonlit sugar-cane plantation, and the assembled throng, now participants in the drama, transitions to the time and place of the story. African inspired scenic elements appear throughout the opera. At the final apotheosis, *Koanga*, Palmyra, and four African dancers walk hand-in-hand toward the back of the stage, toward a stunning photographic image of a beadwork tapestry called “My Sea, My Sister, My Tears” created by the South African master beader, Ntombephi ‘Induna’ Ntobela. Next the Epilogue returns us to the bare white set with Uncle Joe and the enthralled young people. The narration over, they sing a song of optimism: “Let’s hope true lovers will find happiness this soft may morning.” They depart leaving us with the final image of a young African-American girl walking off hand-in-hand with her mother – the image of hope.



Norman Garrett (Koanga) and dancers in the last tableau before the epilogue
Photo: Clive Barda

None of this would have had the impact it did without the two impressive leads, the charismatic American baritone Norman Garrett in the title role and the expressive young South African soprano Nozuko Teto as Palmyra. Mr. Garrett had all the vocal heft necessary for his role, with a presence as commanding as his voice, yet the true discovery for me was the poised, elegant soprano, Ms Teto, who really comes through as



Nozuko Teto (Palmyra) and Norman Garrett (Koanga)
Photo: Clive Barda

the central focus of the opera. In her critical Act II aria, “The hour is near,” in which she gives her soul to Koanga, her vibrant voice, especially lovely in the higher register, soared effortlessly over Delius’ dense orchestration. A long-established Wexford tradition is the series of Lunchtime recitals that provide the opportunity for Festival artists to display their considerable talents. Ms. Teto gave one, elegantly gowned, presenting such diverse pieces as full-voiced opera excerpts, various lighter Strauss lieder, and a beautiful lullaby from her hometown, Bizana, in the Eastern Cape of South Africa. It too was a highlight of the Festival.

Another member of the *Koanga* cast also gave an impressive recital, the American bass-baritone Aubrey Allcock, who in the role of Uncle Joe had little chance to display his considerable talent. His recital provided this chance, with a full program ranging from Handel’s “O ruddier than the Cherry!,” the jovial Air sung by Polyphemus from Handel’s *Acis and Galatea*, to the languishing Xerxes in the famous cavatina “Ombra ma fu.” Also included were various songs by Schumann, Strauss, Dvorak, and even three familiar spirituals. It all made me wish Delius had written more for this impressive baritone to sing. Others in the cast, white singers all, not quite so shortchanged by the libretto, made effective contributions to the evening: American tenor Jeff Gwaltney as the plantation foreman, Simon Perez, hoping also to marry Palmyra; Spanish baritone Christopher Robertson as the plantation owner, Don José Martinez; and Irish mezzo Kate Allen (last year charming in the lead of the ShortWorks’ *Cenerentola*) as his wife, Clotilda, opposed to the marriage of Koanga and Palmyra. Among the many happy surprises was hearing the five principals (the two leads plus these three) combine at the end of Act I in a quintet that clearly mirrored the famous quintet “Selig, wie die Sonne” from Wagner’s *Die Meistersinger*. It was another peak in this tableau-filled, ensemble-rich, through-composed opera that so captivated this season’s audience in Wexford.

Guglielmo Ratcliff - The Past is Present

Despite *Koanga's* success, the opera that was the hit of the season, with its captivating production and full-bodied singing, was Mascagni's passion-filled Italian verismo opera *Guglielmo Ratcliff*. So compelling was Wexford Festival Opera's performance and production of this impassioned tale of unrequited love, that one could well understand why this early work, not the more familiar *Cavalleria Rusticana*, was Mascagni's favorite. So too, each audience at the two performances I attended, swept away by it all, instantly rose to its feet with wild applause. An evening of discovery indeed.

The story comes from an impassioned narrative poem called *William Ratcliff* written by Henrich Heine in the 1820's, at the peak of German Romanticism. (The poem itself is based on an old Scottish "murder ballad" called "Edwardo," an earlier tale of unrequited love.) Mascagni, as a young composer at the end of the century, found himself similarly rejected and, reading Andrea Maffei's Italian translation of Heine's poem, immediately began setting this text to music – rather than a libretto based on this text. All this accounts for the rather un-operatic nature of the libretto, each of whose four acts is built around a lengthy narrative from the poem. The miracle of the Wexford Festival Opera production is how, when characters spend so much time recounting the past in these narratives, Director Fabio Ceresa makes this all work. Aided by the off-white costumes and sets of Giuseppe Palella and Tiziano Santi respectively, their solution was to make the past alive with the present.



The cast and set of *Guglielmo Ratcliff* Photo: Clive Barda



Annunziata Vestri (Margherita)

Photo: Clive Barda

That is, by imposing an expressionist frame on a veristic score, a process of discovery was ongoing as this gothic story of ghosts and murder unfolded. In the story the obsessed, Byronic, anti-hero, Guglielmo Ratcliff, rejected by Maria MacGregor, has twice sought vengeance by killing two successive fiancés on the eve of their wedding. His wedding gift to Marie in each case was the fiancé's bloody hand, with engagement ring attached. We learn these gruesome facts, as does the third suitor, Count Douglas, in the opera's opening scene, through the first of the opera's narratives by Marie's father. Preceding this, during the overture performed on the open stage, a mysterious, ashen character Margherita punctuates the music with a single, repeated line that opens the ballad, "I have killed my beloved." More mysterious yet, a pair of frightful wolves cling to her every move. Not until the upcoming narrative from Maria's father do we understand that these two omnipresent creatures are the spirits of Maria's previous two suitors; each of the grizzly creatures rises briefly on two legs, thus assuming for a moment the haunting image of the doomed suitors MacGregor describes.

Only in Act IV does mad Margherita herself, an illuminating link between the living and the dead, finally complete this mysterious murder ballad she had begun in the opening of Act I. In her long narration she tells the story of Maria's mother, "the beautiful Elisa," who was loved by Edwardo Ratcliff, Guglielmo's father. Elisa had



Angelo Villari (Guglielmo Ratcliff)

Photo: Clive Barda

rejected Edwardo just as Maria had Guglielmo. During her narrative the identity of two white deer that have also stalked the production is clarified; they are the ghosts of Elisa and Edwardo. Past and present mix the entire evening, perhaps most stunningly in Act III, the “Black Rock” scene where Guglielmo had earlier killed each of the two suitors and where he will soon duel Douglas. A large, white, dead tree trunk resembling an arm and hand (clearly the hand with the ring from a dead suitor) lies across the stage. The two wolves (dancers on all fours) lunge and gnaw at Guglielmo; behind them the pair of deer recede into the darkness.

The two other long narratives belong to the title character, one in Act II introducing Ratcliff already at fever pitch, the other in the Act III, no less energized. Indeed the role itself may be one of the most demanding for tenor in all opera, that of a true heldentenor with a consistently high tessitura. The powerful Sicilian tenor Angelo Villari was simply astounding, hurling one stentorian high note after another in true “can belto” fashion. He was perhaps a little off pitch at times in the top notes, but who could complain given he had to go at full throttle for long stretches piercing the rich, full orchestra which so often doubled the voice in true verismo fashion. It was a thrilling night of impassioned tenor singing, yet Villari could also sing expressively in quieter moments. Still, his most reflective moment comes not from the voice but in the famous Act III

Intermezzo, “Il sogno di Ratcliff” (Ratcliff’s Dream). The wistful melody, reminiscent of “Somewhere over the rainbow,” wonderfully encapsulates his longing for Maria, rising from a poignant oboe melody to a true Tristanesque climax. As a leitmotif during the opera, it makes for a wonderful compliment to the tenor’s prolonged histrionics,

One would like to have heard more from Maria, the object of Ratcliff’s obsession, especially given that the role was taken so well by Mariangela Sicilia, certainly one of the most exciting young sopranos to have emerged from Italy in the last few years. I have heard her in

numerous roles at the Rossini Opera Festival, Pesaro, and her Lunchtime Recital showed off a true spinto soprano with both secure high notes and full mezzo range. Alas, Mascagni gave her relatively little to sing, mostly in the last act (she doesn’t even appear in Acts II and III), but what we did hear reinforced the impression I had already of her in other contexts. She is an exciting singing-actress with a voice fully capable of slicing through Mascagni’s full orchestration. Other standouts in the fine cast included Italian mezzo-soprano Annunziata Vestri as the mysterious Margherita, on stage through much of the opera, with an especially compelling delivery of her crucial Act IV narrative; excellent Italian bass Gianluca Buratto as Macgregor with his commanding first act narrative; and sturdy baritone David Stout as the doomed third suitor, Douglas.

Two other elements were important factors contributing to the success of this production. One was certainly the young Italian conductor Francesco Cilluffo, who drew such expressive, idiomatic playing from the fine Orchestra of Wexford Festival Opera. I had heard him conduct another ghost-ridden opera last summer at the Martina Franca Festival in southern Italy, Marco Tutino’s *Le braci* (“Embers”). His conducting of that opera, in which the orchestra plays a key role in establishing psychological depth and passion, certainly must have contributed to the requisite passion and intensity he brought to *Guglielmo Ratcliff*, a young man’s



Mariangela Sicilia (Maria) and Angelo Villari (Guglielmo Ratcliff)
Photo: Clive Barda

opera of obsession, angst, and longing. The other element was the production itself with its semi-expressionistic concept superimposed on this Romantic/veristic score. Large picture frames dominate throughout the opera until, by the final act, the production provides a stunning mirror image between the ghostly world of the past and the anguished present. The libretto may call for the gruesome deaths of Maria and Ratcliff, but the image we are left with in the stylish production is of the pair slipping through the frame to join for eternity the ghostly images of the deer-headed Elisa and Edwardo, whose story they mirror. The sold out Wexford audiences loved it all – rightly so.

Le Pré aux clercs - A sparkling *opéra comique*

Balancing the heavier fare of these two works was Hérold's long neglected but once immensely popular *opéra comique* of 1832, *Le Pré aux clercs*. Festival Director David Agler, with a warm spot for Delius, also commented in the pre-opera publicity that he had the personal satisfaction "of knowing that, at long last, an opera on the wish list of festival founder Dr. Tom Walsh is finally being produced at Wexford." The scintillating *opéra comique* was indeed a nice choice, not only providing a welcome comic contrast to the other festival offerings, but providing a chance to hear this charming piece, once so popular that by mid-20th century it had

received over 1600 performances at the Opéra-Comique alone. It then virtually slid into oblivion, to be revived only last spring by the Opéra-Comique in its house, the Salle Favart, celebrating the theatre's 300th anniversary. Wexford's performance, a co-production with the Opéra-Comique, also included three of the principal singers from the Paris production. All this made for a pleasing occasion all around.

The title of the opera, *Le Pré aux clercs* ("The Clerks' Meadow"), refers to the popular café in Paris across the Seine from the Louvre, historically famous for lovers' trysts and duels that were typically carried out in the green park between the two. Éric Ruf, now head of the Comédie Française, provided a production with four colorful, realistic trees, positioned differently in each act. They caught the essence of the bucolic settings, one a garden in Étampes, others in and around the Paris locations. Lush Renaissance-era costumes by Renato Bianchi helped define the period, France's 16th-century Wars of Religion between the Protestant Huguenots and the Catholics, fodder for conflicts of love intrigue in which not only romance but religion is the issue. A serious undercurrent thus prevails in this basically lightweight piece (complete with a deadly duel at opera's end). The colorful, traditional production and costumes aptly caught the flavor of the lively work, which includes among other things delightful songs, dances, and even an elaborate courtly masquerade complete with Harlequins and Columbines.



The Cast of *Le Pré aux clercs*

Photo: Clive Barda



Marie-Ève Munger
(Countess Isabelle)
Photo: Clive Barda

Munger as the young Protestant Countess Isabelle de Montal, caught in an archetypal bind involving a forced marriage – in this case to a Catholic nobleman, the duel-crazy Count de Comminges, rather than to her childhood sweetheart from Navarre, Baron de Mergy. Isabelle's two big arias provided ample opportunity for elaborate coloratura, especially in the *cavatina-cabaletta* showstopper, "O jours d'innocence," opening the second act. This allowed Ms. Munger to display the ease, agility and brilliance of her upper range, with some especially attractive soft passages as well. Also a highlight was the long violin introduction to this aria so expressively performed by Concertmaster, Fionnuala Hunt, who happily got her first chance ever for a curtain call in Wexford at the end of the opera.

The other two French performers from the Paris production who contributed so much to the success of the opera in Wexford were mezzo Marie Lenormand as Marguerite de Valois, once forced into a political marriage to the Protestant King of Navarre (and thus anxious to help her lady-in-waiting, Isabelle) and French tenor Eric Huchet as the boasting buffo figure, Cantarelli, director of court festivities at the Louvre. With much French dialogue and ample ensemble work, the imperious Lenormand and the hilarious Huchet added a feisty counterpoint to the more placid moments of the drama. My favorite number in the score is the long trio for Lenormand,



Eric Huchet (Cantarelli)
Photo: Clive Barda

Munger and Huchet clearly modeled after Rossini's incomparable trio from *Count Ory*, "A la faveur de cette nuit obscure." While a masked ball commences in an adjacent room, the three plan a secret marriage between Isabelle and Mergy; they exhibited all the vocal nuances and sheer joy of ensemble performance that made this scene, indeed the production as a whole, such a delight.

Three other French Canadians stood out, contributing to the opera's success. One was the pert young soprano Magali Simard-Galdès as Nicette, an innkeeper who, with Girot (bass-baritone Tomislav Lavoie, a hotelier at the Pré aux clerics), is the focus of a second more comic love affair. The two sing another of the mellifluous ensembles, the lovely opening duet, "Dans la prairie," but she is the one who really has a chance to shine in the later jaunty dance song, "A la fleur du jeune âge." In her Lunchtime recital, she further demonstrated her animation and Zerlina-like charm. She shared the recital with fellow Canadian, baritone Dominique Côté, the villainous Comte de



Magali Simard-Galdès (Nicette)
Photo: Clive Barda

Comminges from the opera. Here they made a happy pair in the playful Papagano / Papagana duet from *The Magic Flute* and were especially entertaining (and funny) in the famous "Fly Duet" from Offenbach's *Orphée aux enfers* – another display of the kind of young talent and brio that helped make the ensemble-rich *Le Pré aux clerics* so successful.

A Journey to a Special Place

Benjamin Britten, in his famous speech of 1964, “On Receiving the First Aspen Award,” made the following poignant observations on what contributes to a true musical experience:

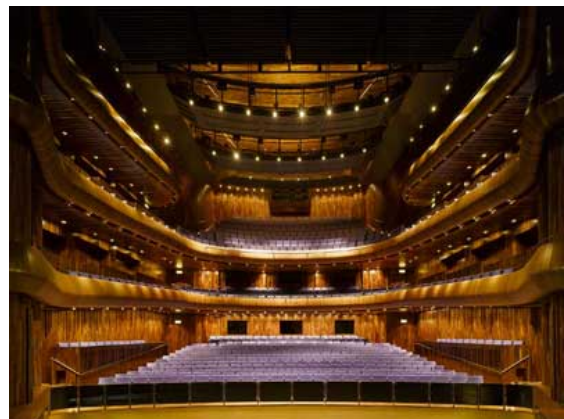
Music demands more from a listener than simply the possession of a tape-machine or a transistor radio [an ipod or smart-phone today!]. It demands some preparation, some effort, a journey to a special place, saving up for a ticket, some homework on the programme perhaps, some clarification of the ears and sharpening of the instincts.

Wexford is certainly a special place, not only the delightful coastal town itself, but also the award-winning opera house on High Street, already acclaimed as “the best small opera house in the world,” now officially recognized as Ireland’s National Opera House. It is indeed worth saving up for a ticket, if you can get one, or attending one of the always-popular Lunchtime recitals at the beautiful, acoustically friendly St. Iberius Church on Main Street. Always popular too are the ShortWorks, opera performances with sparse staging and piano accompaniment.

Unfortunately, these ShortWorks are now performed at a less-than-hospitable performance space at White’s Hotel. Nor were this year’s productions up to par. They included a rather shoddy “card-board box” version of *Hansel and Gretel*; Massenet’s one-act *opéra comique* *Le Portait de Manon*, a trivial epilogue to *Manon*, hardly worth the effort; and a sparely staged, but effective *Tosca*, which at least caught fire thanks to the electrifying performance of the young South Korean soprano Eunhee Kim. But to even give these ShortWorks a chance, Wexford Festival Opera would do well to find a performing venue that better served them. From earlier years I know that these works, innovatively directed and staged, with a slew of talented young artists, have the potential of being as engaging as those presented at the main-stage Opera House.

Another improvement would be some pre-opera lectures at the opera house that better follow Britten’s call for “some clarification of the ears and sharpening of the instincts,” especially since Wexford rightly takes such pride in presenting such unfamiliar works. Répétiteur Elizabeth Drwal did little of this in the short introductory talks preceding two of the operas, offering some well-researched but often superfluous (and occasionally inaccurate) background material, better read at some other time. Members of the audience are, after all, getting ready for a musical experience. Noticeably absent this year was the fine pre-opera lecturer Roberto Recchia, also a consistently imaginative director in past years of some of Wexford’s most engaging ShortWorks (including the above mentioned *La Cenerentola*).

These observations aside, Wexford Festival Opera remains one of the most exciting “special places” in the world for innovative, first-rate opera - a place not only worth the journey, but one that provides fascinating seasons of discovery. Next season promises more of the same: *Herculanum* by Félicien David (1810-1876), a forgotten mid-nineteenth-century *grand opera* with much rich orchestral color; *Vanessa* by Samuel Barber (1910-1981), familiar American fare perhaps, but worthy of revival; and *Maria de Rudenz* by Gaetano Donizetti (1797-1848), a dark and beautiful *drama tragico*, yet another milestone in Wexford’s continued exploration of rarely-staged works by this popular bel canto master. There is a lot to discover in Wexford. Save up!



The Wexford Opera House Photo: Ros Kavanaugh