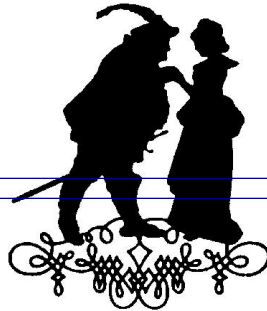


Opera con Brio

Richard B. Beams



Wexford Opera Festival 2014 A Formula for Success

As a happy prelude to Wexford Festival Opera's sixty-third season, the award-winning opera house on High Street, already acclaimed as "the best small opera house in the world," was officially recognized as Ireland's National Opera House. Ireland's Minister for Arts, Heritage and the Gaeltacht, Heather Humphrey, made the formal announcement on the opening night. The renowned twelve-day Festival featured the usual three main-stage operas as well as a number of always-popular ShortWorks (operas, sometimes abridged) and daytime vocal recitals. By the end of the Festival, organizers announced an increase in overall ticket sales. No surprise, for in the ten years I have been attending - since the final season in the old Theatre Royal in the fall of 2005 - the adventurous Festival has been consistently successful, even in several transitional venues.

This season also happens to mark the tenth anniversary of Artistic Director David Agler's tenure. Surely much of Wexford's success in recent years is a credit to his invigorating and insightful leadership. For one thing, what would become a typical approach to



The Wexford Opera House Photo: Ros Kavanaugh

opera programming over the period seemed to emerge in that 2005 season: an unusual Italian work from the nineteenth-century *bel canto* (Donizetti's *Maria di Rohan*); a French work, usually a rarity or neglected masterpiece (Faure's *Pénélope*); and an American work, often brand new, or if not, one clearly worthy of a fresh airing (Carlisle Floyd's scintillating *Susannah*.)

With this winning formula back in full force this year, it was a pleasure to see productions and performances that did full justice to the diverse, interesting, and largely unknown works on the schedule. The *bel canto* offering was perhaps the least known of all, a forgotten *opera buffa* of the mid-nineteenth century, *Don Bucefalo*. The composer, Antonio Cagnoni, wrote the work as a graduation exam for students at the Milan Conservatory. Unexpectedly successful, the opera was presented in various Italian theaters during the 1847 season. Equally unknown for today's audience (if that's possible) was the French offering, an impressionist *Salomé* by Antoine Mariotte, a work long overshadowed by the more expressionist and familiar *Salome* of his contemporary, Richard Strauss.



The troops gather for the Christmas truce

Photo: Clive Barda

The third opera, perhaps the most eagerly anticipated, was a new American opera, *Silent Night*, already well on its way to becoming an established masterpiece. This work won its composer, Kevin Puts, the Pulitzer Prize in music in 2012. Commissioned by the Minnesota Opera, where it premiered in November of 2011, it continued its sold-out run with its East Coast premiere in Philadelphia soon afterwards. The Wexford performances, the opera's European premiere, were the "hot tickets" of the Festival and rightly so. As interesting as both *Don Bucefalo* and *Salomé* were in live performance, I suspect *Silent Night* will eclipse them in

making the rounds of Europe's opera houses, especially since 2014 marks the centenary of the opera's poignant subject, the Christmas truces that spontaneously sprang forth on the front lines of World War I in 1914.

Film to opera: *Joyeux Noël*, riveting as *Silent Night*

Not that this compelling work needs such an anniversary - the Wexford production vividly did justice to an opera, *Silent Night*, that is primarily a reminder of the agony and futility of war. In Minnesota, the three camps - German, Scottish, and French - appeared sequentially on a revolving stage; in Wexford, director Tomer Zvulun and his set designer, Erhard Rom, stacked the three groups vertically in a box-like structure, the Scots on top, the French in the middle, the Germans at stage level, thus providing a distinct advantage that at certain times one could observe (and hear, since each sang in their own tongue) a simultaneity of action. In front of this structure, the empty space became a "No Man's Land" where the troops would gather for the truce - yet where, too, with grim irony, the dead fell in battle.

Such ironic juxtaposition is, of course, a critical component of the work, radiating even from the implications of the title, a "Silent Night" amidst the cacophony of war. So too it is with Christian Caron's 2005 film *Joyeux Noël* on which the opera is based and whose scenarios the opera follows rather closely.

Wexford aired the film on the morning of each performance of the opera. While this was a wonderful idea, and I was thankful to have had this opportunity, there was a certain disadvantage as well: one couldn't help comparing film and opera while experiencing the latter. That said, Puts used elements of "cinematic technique" - telescoping and instant juxtaposition of images - effectively in his opera, clearly influenced by the film. But what he also was able to provide in *Silent Night* were occasional expressive "operatic" moments - letting some of the especially poignant scenes from the film take wing.



Matthew Worth, Philip Horst and Gavan Ring in *Silent Night* Photo: Clive Barda

In the film we follow individual young men from each side into the misery and savagery of seemingly interminable trench warfare. Having met them first amidst their blissfully naïve assumptions in the summer of 1914 that their few months away in battle would have them home for Christmas, we follow the plight of these individuals caught in a web of uncertainty and horror. In the opera, Puts' expressive "operatic" moments periodically emerged in contrast to his often-monotone vocal writing, heightening the human pathos and irony. One such moment featured the French commander, Lieutenant Audebert, struggling in a nostalgic arioso to lead his troops while in nearby occupied France his wife gives birth. The young American baritone Matthew Worth was as warmly expressive in this scene as he was in his impressive Lunchtime Recital, articulating with such idiomatic phrasing both songs of Ives and *lieder* of Schumann.

In a way I wished for more of such expressive vocal moments amidst Puts' assured orchestral writing, which is stylistically indebted to "movie music." However, the orchestral music effectively portrayed not only battle scenes and such, but also many beautiful interludes (one painted the approaching dawn). Stunningly effective too were occasional timely and eloquent silences. One would

have expected to hear the famous carol "Stille Nacht"— the carol in fact actually sung by the Germans in 1914 (and with which, ironically, the English were then less familiar); however, as Puts and his librettist Mark Campbell explained, they wanted all music to be original (unlike in the movie). "Silence was the point," as one commented. Still, Danish opera singer Anna Sorensen (Irish soprano Sinéad Mulhern) sang *Dona nobis pacem* ("Give us peace") in the opera; the moment said it all.

Indeed the strong, mostly male, cast served the opera well. Notable were the following: tenor Chad Johnson as Nikolaus Sprink, the German opera singer (and Anna's lover) with impressive, passionate tone (how much better than the poorly dubbed voices of Natalie Dessay and Rolando Villazon in the film); American bass-baritone Philip Horst as the stern German commander; effectively honey-toned, British tenor Alexander Sprague as the young, enthusiastic Scott, Jonathan Dale, so devastated when his younger brother is shot and killed. One additional female protagonist was an appealing complement to the predominantly male cast, Irish mezzo Kate Allen as Lieutenant Audebert's wife, whose lush and velvety tone brought the same kind of expressive empathy to the character as she did as the lead in the ShortWorks *Cenerentola*.

Much credit too must go to the conductor of this intricate and eclectic score, Michael Christie, as well as to the Wexford Festival Orchestra and Chorus for bringing this captivating and poignant score to life. Converting film to opera is tricky business, no less so than converting literature to opera. Puts and Campbell effected the transformation masterfully, with a riveting amalgamation of the cinematic and operatic. Ultimately, silence wins out. At the end, a grey curtain gradually, silently, descends over the three-tiered set of ostracized regiments who dared carve out a moment of peace.

Their reward is to be sent to other points on the front where surely death awaits. If ever there was an opera from which humanity might learn a lesson, this is it; peace and war make strange bedfellows indeed.

A symbolist and exotic *Salomé*

While it may have been somewhat beneficial to attend Puts' compelling opera on the heels of viewing the film *Joyeux Noël*, it was perhaps a slight barrier to experiencing Mariotte's *Salomé* to have Strauss' more familiar (and frequently performed) *Salome* lurking in the back of one's mind. Products of the same period, each composer responded in his own way to Oscar Wilde's taut one-act play, Strauss with intense post-Wagnerian Expressionism, Mariotte with nuanced post-Debussian Impressionism, and a touch of the exotic. The Strauss opera has become an icon of the operatic repertory, while Mariotte's work has been relegated to oblivion. Happily, Wexford Festival Opera has now made a strong case for the underdog, confirming that its banishment to obscurity is far from warranted. It may never replace Strauss' *Salome*, but it deserves hearings on its own merits.

And this Wexford did, with an appropriately Symbolist approach that reflected the movement that attracted Wilde in the first place. The number seven was the fulcrum, (as the always insightful and entertaining pre-opera lecturer Roberto Recchia pointed out). Tiziano Santi's production consisted of a golden, amber set with seven proscenium arches receding toward a pit where Iokanaan (John the Baptist) lay imprisoned. (One is reminded of the closed doors of Béla Bartók's *Bluebeard's Castle*, another symbolist work). Attending *Salomé* throughout are seven veiled figures wearing crowns; Salomé herself performs her "Dance of the Seven Veils" within the cramped space of a small golden box. At the end, symbolist elements take over again. The executioner emerges from the pit not with the severed head, but with a blood-soaked crown; in the final tableau, seven crowns surround Salomé who, rather than being crushed by soldiers as Hérode commands, grins wildly and longingly out toward the audience.



Na'ama Goldman as Salomé

Photo: Clive Barda

I'm not sure I can explain the symbolism here, nor was all flawless in this "*Tragédie lyrique* in seven scenes." Unfortunately, too, Wexford could not let its audience forego a half-hour intermission, which interrupted the dramatic flow. Opening the second half, the famous dance itself might have been better served with a substitute dancer rather than with the awkward attempts of an otherwise fine Salomé, the young Israeli mezzo-soprano Na'ama Goldman. And not showing the severed head may well have been part of the symbolism, but perhaps it was just heightened sensitivity to the recent horrific beheadings in the Middle East (although viewing the decapitated body of Iokanaan in the distant pit was no less gruesome.)

Without quibbling over details, however, what made it all so absorbing was the manner in which the production telescoped the action (rather cinematically) to highlight the element that most counts, Mariotte's intense and poetic score. The strong orchestral playing of the Wexford Festival Orchestra, under the inspired leadership of David Angus, furthered the case for hearing this interesting and persuasive score more often, with its mellow polyphonic music, rich in expressive nuances. And the talented supporting cast were all persuasive in their respective roles, notably mezzo, Nora Sourouzian, an intense and vibrant Hérodias, and baritone Igor Golovatenko, a striking presence on stage as Iokanaan,



Na'ama Goldman as Salomé and Igor Golovatenko as Iokanaan
Photo: Clive Barda

his dark, glowing timbre aptly penetrating from off-stage as well. (Each were standouts last year too, the former in the Massenet double bill, the latter in the highly successful rarity, *Cristina, regina di Svezia*.)

Curiously, the score calls for no sopranos, and Wexford was fortunate to have the very young, tall, and attractive mezzo-soprano Na'ama Goldman in the title role. With a feisty even frenetic demeanor, she acted the part of this disturbed young princess with aplomb, while her lush vocal tone, exhibited with some exaggeration in her lunchtime concert, was a nice complement to the dense and often dark orchestration. And the fact that the "Dance of the Seven Veils" fell so short was really the fault of the choreographer, Vittorio Colella, who evidently attempted to compensate for not having a dancer by having Ms. Goldman squirm and wave a scarf ridiculously, all in a relatively cramped space that accentuated the triteness of it all. Dance aside, Ms. Goldman basically brought a wonderful animated presence to the role of Salomé, with just the right amount of Eastern exoticism to match Mariotte's sensuous, but sadly neglected score. Thanks indeed to Wexford for bringing it back to the stage.

Don Bucefalo – A buffa delight

Providing a frothy foil to the two serious operas, Cagnoni's forgotten *opera buffa*, *Don Bucefalo*, was sheer delight, with its energized and youthful cast. Especially effective were the brisk tempi and bright orchestral details elicited by the young Spanish conductor Sergio Alapont. In last year's equally scintillating comic offering, *Il Cappello di paglia di Firenze* by Nino Rota, Maestro Alapont achieved a similarly captivating performance. It helped too that the fine Italian bass Filippo Fontana assumed the lead in both operas, once again bringing both depth and focused *buffo* élan to his engaging performance. In this case, as *Don Bucefalo*, a pompous music master marketing his expertise, he was especially effective and often hilarious, notably in such musical parody scenes (complete with *buffo* aria) in which he rehearsed the overture, or composed an aria in the latest *bel canto* (Verdian) style.



Filippo Fontana as Don Bucefalo Photo: Clive Barda

Indeed the work itself, written as a piece for students at the Milan Conservatory, is a rich musical satire centered on would-be singers whose hopes spring eternal for careers of fame and fortune. (Similar parodies are Cimarosa's *Il maestro de cappella*, recently performed by Boston Baroque, and, more familiar to most, Meredith Wilson's *The Music Man*.) Director Kevin Newberry sought to help make the musical parody just as appealing to a contemporary audience as it certainly was to music students at the Milan Conservatory by updating the action

The cast of *Don Bucefalo*

Photo: Clive Barda

to the late twentieth century. The unit set, as Mr. Newberry explains in the program notes, recalls the multi-purpose community centers in Maine where he rehearsed countless productions during his youth – “complete with a stage, a small café, a basketball hoop, stacks of multi-purpose chairs and a wide variety of sporting, theatrical, musical and town meeting accessories.”

This set, by Victoria Tzykun, is indeed stunningly realistic in a myriad of details, from basketball hoop to the hodgepodge of equipment and furniture described above. It all works best in the third act, when the aspiring locals put on their under-rehearsed opera. The opening scenes, however, would perhaps have been better in an outdoor venue, when Don Bucefalo – à la the comic quack Dulcamara in Donizetti’s *L’elisir d’amore* – bursts into the town. Yet the venue served nicely enough to introduce the assorted characters in the convoluted plot, with their various ambitions and rivalries.

Among the fine cast – or rather budding “artistes” – were many who helped carry the day, especially Canadian soprano Marie-Ève Munger as Rosa, the principal village singer (and supposed widow), who exhibited much sparkling coloratura but also some fine eloquent long-breathed cantabile moments (think Bellini). Irish soprano Jennifer Davis made for an effective

“rival,” *prima donna* Agata, especially in her poignant Act III cavatina. Among the suitors of Anna, the fine American lyric tenor Matthew Newlin stood out as the Count of Belprato, with the kind of nuanced phrasing and lyricism (and a secure high “C”) that he had exhibited in his varied and interesting Lunchtime recital of German *lieder*, Italian songs, and contemporary American songs. (Now singing with the Deutsche Oper Berlin, he will also perform in the world premiere of Kevin Puts’ new opera, *The Manchurian Candidate*.) He is a tenor to watch - impresario *Bucefalo*, take note!

Other performers, all quite fine as well, included two other tenors, Davide Bartolucci as Don Marco, another rival for Rosa, and Peter Davoren as Rosa’s husband in disguise. Among the many pleasures of the evening were the farcical antics conveyed with secure musicianship by these characters: the *buffo* patter of Mr. Bartolucci in the first act finale and the pompous authoritative ring to Mr. Davoren’s vocal lines. Yet the great joy of hearing this archetypal *opera buffa* was the



Marie-Ève Munger as Rosa

Photo: Clive Barda



The Opera House from Wexford Harbor

Photo: Ros Kavanaugh

lively ensemble writing – an *a cappella* ensemble of stasis à la Rossini, a grand ensemble to end the first act, and an ample allotment of ever-tuneful trios, quartets and the like – all performed with such *brio* that the audience in Wexford was swept away as surely as was the audience of 1847 at the Milan Conservatory.

ShortWorks

All in all, it's hard to beat Wexford Opera Festival's colorful mix of neglected operas, shorter works, and concerts of various sorts. Per usual, the Wexford Opera season was rounded out with its always-popular ShortWorks, housed once again this year at White's Hotel. With sparse staging and piano accompaniment, these works were no less engaging. Included this year were such varied pieces as Puccini's *Il Tabarro*, and a double bill including a little trifle by Gustav Holst called *The Wandering Scholar*, followed by Gilbert and Sullivan's first operetta, *Trial by Jury*, a lively piece that nicely rounded out the satirical edge so neatly explored with *Don Bucefalo*.

Best was Rossini's ever-popular *La Cenerentola*, directed by Roberto Recchia, whose production for the ShortWorks each year at Wexford is always something special. Placing the action in the bland but entertaining world of the 1930's cinema worked well. Irish mezzo Kate Allen was stunning in the lead, exhibiting with her

rich mezzo all the ease, flexibility and precise coloratura required for this virtuosic role. Typically, singers with relatively minor roles in the main stage opera get major roles here: Filippo Fontana as the obsequious Dandini, an engaging Eamonn Mulhall as the lyrical Prince Ramiro; Davide Bartolucci as the ebullient Don Magnifico.

A glance at next year

Next year's offering of three main-stage operas, following Wexford's signature formula, promises more rarities. The American/English mode is represented in Delius' *Koanga*, an atmospheric work with much material rooted in African-American music. Said to be Delius' favorite work, it preceded by some years *A Village Romeo and Juliet*, the stunning hit of Wexford's 2012 season. The Italian mode is represented by Mascagni's late nineteenth-century *verisimo* opera, *Guglielmo Ratcliff*, a tragedy whose taxing tenor lead matches any in the repertory. Meanwhile, *bel canto* finds its way into the season via the delightful and endlessly tuneful *opéra comique* of 1829, *Le pré aux clercs* (*The Clerks' Meadow*) by Ferdinand Hérold. All three works are so rarely performed that I would be willing to bet few reading these words have ever seen them staged or perhaps even heard of them. All the more reason to be in Wexford in 2015.