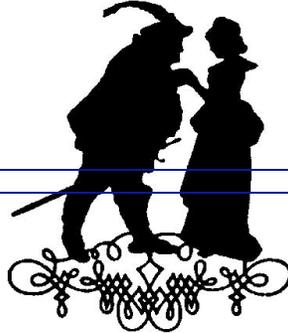


Opera con Brio

Summer 2011
Richard B. Beams



A Feisty *Italian Girl in Algiers* Boston Midsummer Opera, July 2011

It's midsummer in Boston. The heat is on. Time for a little midsummer madness, aptly provided by the entertaining, inventively crafted production by Boston Midsummer Opera of Rossini's ever-ebullient crowd pleaser, *The Italian Girl in Algiers*.

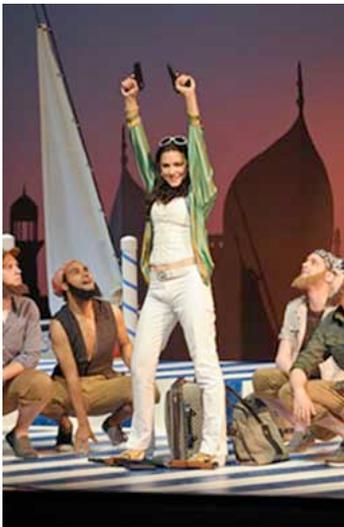
In 1813 after the premiere in Venice, Rossini himself wrote, "I thought after having heard my opera, the Venetians would treat me like a crazy man; they turned out to be crazier than I am." Bostonians are perhaps a little more subdued, as was the director Drew Minter's approach to this traditionally comic work so often filled with caricature and slap stick. But the more restrained approach of this singer turned director (see my review of his performance in *Teseo* at <http://www.operaconbrio.com/teseo.pdf>) worked magnificently, and the audience certainly parted with all the enthusiasm and joy of any Venetian audience.

Updated to a modern somewhat westernized Arab country, with a colorful cutout set suggesting the locale and using a contemporary English translation, the comic tinta was certainly there in abundance. But underneath the surface, a shadow of menace persisted. Put another way, in this production, we don't get the radical dichotomy between the barbaric and the civilized. The Bey, Mustafa, aptly and expressively sung by Eric Downs, appears from the start not with all the stereotypically outrageous exaggerated gestures of a pompous and villainous buffo bass. Instead just a stylish hint of threat remains, befitting the power-monger who would control all events and women, in spite of the exaggerated intervals and elaborate coloratura that Rossini gives him. Little was played for cheap laughs, either in facial expression, or later in Mustafa's first meeting with Isabella (anything but the buffoon she first calls him), or in the farcical "Pappataci" trio near the end, as the increasingly gullible Mustafa is initiated into the select order of Italians. (The typical *commedia dell'arte* gag, avoided here, is to have the Algerian Bey dig into his spaghetti with gusto.)



David Kravitz as Taddeo, Eric Downs as Mustapha, Bradley Williams as Lindoro, and Sandra Piques Eddy as the Italian Girl
(Photos by McKenzie Photography)

Yet the essence of this production revolved, as it should, around the young lady from Italy who outsmarts all others on stage. The first scene may focus on Mustafa the power monger, but soon Rossini introduces us to the woman who will turn him to putty, Isabella, the Italian girl. Marilyn Horne rightly called Isabella "a proto-feminist, imbued with such admirable qualities as loyalty, courage, compassion, quick wittedness, and an unfailing sense of fun." A portrayal of Isabella thus requires a performer of formidable stage presence and self-possession, as well as a virtuoso voice with a wide range of pitch and dynamics and finely controlled coloratura.



Sandra Piques Eddy as Isabella
(Photos by McKenzie)

The mezzo of the night, the charismatic Sandra Piques Eddy, was more than up to the task – indeed she quickly eclipsed any previous associations a listener might have had with other interpreters of the role. She was Isabella. And Rossini would have loved the voice, which had all the coloratura polish and earthy low-notes the role demands. She had it all, from facial expressions that caught every nuance of the text (without resorting to caricature) and requisite modern don't-mess-with-me postures. From the start of her entrance aria, she vibrantly conveyed her unflappable self-confidence. Then after a lyrical cantabile

of yearning for her absent Lindoro, she wrapped up the opening scene with defiant, wide-ranging coloratura that assured us once and for all who was in charge.

It may go a bit too far to claim that she made the show, especially with such a strong supporting cast. Bradley Williams as Isabella's more tentative lover, Lindoro, (not a captured slave, but here a spiffy butler in Mustafa's enclave) proved to be a genuine lyric Rossini tenor with his suave, flexible, and assured tone. Boston favorite, bass David Kravitz with his rich tones and exceptional musicality, was an understated, but endearing Taddeo, mixing subtle humor and irony into what is all too often an over ripe role. Soprano Sara Jakubiak, as Elvira, the discarded spouse, unleashed her bright voice with great flare to highlight the comic peak of the performance, the *stretta* of stupefaction that closes the first act. Her piercing wail rang above the vocal shenanigans of the other characters – bells ringing, crows



Bradley Williams as Lindoro, Eric Downs as Mustapha, and David Kravitz as Taddeo (Photos by McKenzie Photography)



The cast of *The Italian Girl in Algiers* in the closing *stretta* of Act I
(Photos by McKenzie Photography)

calling, heads ticking, drums beating, etc. "In Venice," wrote one critic of the day, "the audience by the end were struggling and gasping for breath, and wiping the tears from their eyes." Likewise the audience in Boston, thanks not just to the music, but also to the vivid pantomiming of all.

The Rossini orchestra was scaled down to an 18-member chamber ensemble. In the hands of conductor (and Music Director) Susan Davenny Wyner, this was no handicap. Indeed, rather than have the string section smother Rossini's sparkling wind writing, one could savor fully this brilliant and often witty color. Who but Rossini would write so delightfully for bassoon and piccolo to double each other as they do at the recapitulation of the overture's enchanting 2nd theme? And what a delight to savor the effervescent overture itself, with no intrusive antics on stage to distract from enjoying the color and brio.

This pared down approach, in which less was more, rather shaped the whole production, with its simplicity and directness. Directorial intrusions doing just the opposite are all too frequent with this rich and sophisticated opera. Once, for example, in Isabella's final patriotic aria, "Pensa alla patria," the renowned Italian playwright Dario Fo, as director of the 2006 Rossini Festival production in Pesaro, Italy, so cluttered the stage variously with an Italian World Cup soccer team racing across, and then with the Italian Tour de France cycling team (among other distractions), that one could hardly focus on the music. Likewise with the MET's mid-'70s Ponnelle production, with all its hyperbolic buffo posturing for Mustafa and unsettling ethnic stereotyping. Admirably, Drew Minter simply let the characters, within his appropriately updated context, be themselves... aided naturally by Rossini's invigorating music.

Isabella, Lindoro and Taddeo are simply the unhappy "guests," in Drew Minter's words, of a "somewhat westernized...moderately civilized Arab country." Funny, but maybe not so funny. Customs differ, and so do the myriad ways to reconcile and liberate the human spirit. Happily, a little midsummer madness always helps.

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