The Sleepwalkers

by Charles Jernigan, Guest Reviewer for *Opera con Brio*

The mini-festival which **Teatro Nuovo** stages each summer as a culmination of their bel canto training program included two operas this year featuring famous sleepwalking scenes—Verdi's *Macbeth* and Bellini's *La sonnambula.* These operas are not exactly rarities (the Metropolitan will offer a new production of *La sonnambula* in the fall for example), but as usual Teatro Nuovo gives opera lovers several interesting twists on these standards. Their *Macbeth* was the rarely done first version (1847) of the opera and *Sonnambula* includes some previously unheard music by Bellini and is being performed in the original keys, almost unheard of in modern performance practice.

When the Théâtre-Lyrique in Paris asked Verdi to provide some ballet music for a revival of ***Macbeth*** in French in 1865, he looked back at the 1847 score and found much of it old fashioned, particularly the cabalettas. There had been five of them and Verdi cut three entirely; he also composed new music for the major Act 4 chorus "Patria oppressa" and wrote a new aria for Lady Macbeth, "La luce langue." The new music was of course in the style of the 1860s, with a dark tint which sounds closer to *Don Carlos* than to 1840s Verdi. The new *Macbeth* was less violent sounding, less "noisy" and brutal, than the first version, and perhaps more psychologically astute. The 1865 version is the one which is almost always revived today. Among other reasons—sopranos are loathe to give up "La luce langue."

But the first version is exciting and in some ways more viral and vital than the 1865 score. Sure, it is brash and even crude at times, but it makes the murdering protagonists stand out in sharp focus. Teatro Nuovo's methodology meant that we got the whole score—all five cabalettas and their repeats—played on the period instruments of the TN orchestra. It was a very exciting—and appropriately noisy—performance.

Much of the credit for the furious and exciting thrust of the violent Shakespearean drama must go to Jakob Lehmann, whose youthful and smiling demeanor cloaked a demon who pushed the orchestra to a furious pace, but who knew how to back off for the quieter sleepwalking scene for the Lady or the pathetic, reflective "Pietà, rispetto, amore" for Macbeth in Act 4. There were interesting and apposite tweaks in tempo or solo instrumentation too.

As for the singers, Ricardo José Rivera owned the stage in the title role. This exceptional baritone had previously sung Severo in Donizetti's *Poliuto* with Teatro Nuovo, and last year he sang the major role of Norcesto in Carolina Uccelli's *Anna di Resburgo.* Watching Rivera's characterization grow from the early scenes of confusion and contemplation to the mad scene at the banquet when he sees Banco's ghost to the final unravelling was to watch a masterly performance. And his lustrous, full baritone is exactly right for Verdi—

but with the bel canto training which provides the vocal support Verdi would have expected. Macbeth is not a florid role, but hearing it sung with the legato and phrasing of bel canto technique made it especially satisfying.

Alexandra Loutsion sang the vocally punishing role of Lady Macbeth with power and control over the coloratura passages woven into her vocal line. She made the notoriously difficult ascent to the high D flat at the end of the sleepwalking scene, but let it go quickly. Her singing had the required vigor and drive, although her acting was sometimes limited, and she hardly differentiated between the exultant joy of her "Trionfai!" cabaletta and the voice for the very different sleepwalking scene (although this is partially the fault of the first version of the opera which does not offer her a way to show her gradual disintegration. She, however, handled the dramatic *brindisi* in the banquet scene particularly well.

Bass Cumhur Görgün as Banco and tenor Martin Luther Clark both sang their arias very well. Clark's "Ah, la paterno mano" with its big chorally- enhanced cabaletta was much applauded. One should not omit the wonderful chorus, made up of the TN students, and led by Derrick Goff, who also played the silent role of King Duncan. The chorus plays an outsized role in *Macbeth* and the stage directors had them come to the front of the stage to sing the beautiful first version of "Patria oppressa" directly to the audience. Whether witches or assassins or the downtrodden Scottish people, they sang and acted with great enthusiasm.

Teatro Nuovo has evolved a method of semi-staging performances which is very effective. Although there are no costumes, the drama is acted on a bare stage with evocative set projections (in this case by Adam J. Thompson) which fit the period. There are a few props—a dagger, a crown, but no stage furniture. The acting is effective and modern, but the semi-production is not updated or modernized. It works much better than most contemporary opera productions which are based on directorial 'concepts'.

The operatic main event was preceded, as usual, by a brief vocal concert and an enlightening lecture by Teatro Nuovo's General and Artistic Director, Will Crutchfield. The concert included songs with texts by *Macbeth*'s librettist Francesco Maria Piave; most of them were from the *Album per Piave,* which Verdi put together as a way of raising money for Piave's wife and child after the librettist had a debilitating stroke. Verdi recruited famous composers to write the songs, including Auber, Cagnoni, Mercadante, F. Ricci, Thomas and Verdi himself. The songs were sung by the accomplished Teatro Nuovo vocal students, but the outstanding song was the "Anzoleta avanti la regata" from *La regata veneziana* with text by Piave and music by Rossini. The remarkable soprano Sabatina Mauro sang the piece with a very well developed lower register. She promises great things.

Crutchfield's lecture on *Macbeth* was fascinating as usual, especially the tidbit that prior to Verdi's opera, no Shakespeare play had ever been performed in Italy. There were translations and Shakespeare was known in literary circles, but it was the opera which

stimulated a healthy production of the plays themselves. The 1847 opera was wildly successful, and even the witches' chorus in Act 1 was encored five times at some performances. The 1865 remake was much less successful until the Verdi revival of the mid-twentieth century. Now we hardly ever hear the earlier version; it is a mistake, for this is a tale told by a genius, full of sound and fury, signifying much.

Verdi (and Shakespeare) used Lady Macbeth's crucial sleepwalking scene as a way into her subconscious and a confession of her guilt as well as a way to show her psychological disintegration. Seventeen years earlier librettist Felice Romani and Bellini had also used sleepwalking as a way into their heroine Amina's subconscious, but in a manner which demonstrates her innocence and facilitates her reintegration into the community and the triumph of her love. If *Macbeth'*s soundscape is loud and raucous, the soundscape of *La sonnambula* is pastoral and endlessly beautiful.

In Teatro Nuovo's Program Notes for ***La sonnambula*** Will Crutchfield points out that this is the only example of an opera semiseria to stay in the standard repertory, but surely it is also the last of the operatic pastorals, a musical form which evolved from the ancient classical and Renaissance pastorals. Both Handel and Vivaldi wrote pastoral operas, as did Mozart with *Il re pastore,* and pastorals were very popular for ballets as late as Delibes' 1876 *Sylvia.* Felice Romani thought of himself as a classicist and fought against being labeled a Romantic, and certainly he was well versed in the classical pastoral. Romani's libretto was itself based on a pastoral ballet-pantomime by the ubiquitous Eugène Scribe, *La somnambule, ou L'arrivée d'un nouveau seigneur.* Is it any wonder that the name of the opera's heroine is Amina, just one letter away from Aminta, the title hero of Torquato Tasso's famous Renaissance pastoral. Like Tasso's *Aminta*, *La sonnambula*'s plot is disarmingly simple—Amina, soon to be married to Elvino, sleepwalks into the inn room of Count Rodolfo, recently returned incognito to the village and is discovered in this compromising position by the villagers and her fiancé. He meanly rejects her as a "traditrice" and her protestations of innocence go unbelieved in spite of the Count's vouching for her. Only when Amina appears sleepwalking and in danger of falling into the millrace does the village (and Elvino) believe in somnambulism—and in her. Like all pastorals, thwarted love is restored and happiness returns to the community. In *La sonnambula* it is not only Amina and Elvino whose relationship is restored, it is Lisa and Alessio and Rodolfo is restored to the role of feudal lord, a position he had abandoned. The world is set right and the community is reinvigorated.

In his pre-opera lecture, Crutchfield spoke mostly about Felice Romani and the libretto and defended the opera against the accusation of foolishness or simple-mindedness—the belief that the story is a weak structure to hang the pretty tunes and vocal displays on. Crutchfield pointed out that Romani was a wonderful poet (which he was!) and that his beautiful verses inspired the kind of music which Bellini was able to write—those long, long melodies which were the Romantic period's answer to the quiet beauty of the pastoral.

Sonnambula is not a rare opera, but it is rarely heard as Bellini conceived it, sung in the original keys and without cuts occasioned not by weak music, but by empty-headed directors' beliefs that the work is to be valued only for its pretty melodies and vocal display possibilities. Thus we got both of Lisa's arias, uncut, and all of the repeats of the cabalettas with appropriate variations. There was additional music for Elvino's entrance *scena* and in addition we heard music by Bellini which has probably never been performed, including a pastoral duet for two keyed trumpets in the orchestral introduction to Elvino's encounter with Amina and his Act 2 aria.

The first Elvino was Giovanni Battista Rubini, perhaps the greatest tenor of the nineteenth century and Bellini wrote his role in keys with exceptionally high tessitura, so his vocal line was regularly lowered almost from the start, and it is rarely, if ever, heard in the original keys today. Teatro Nuovo used them. Finally, when *La sonnambula* was revived for Giuditta Pasta in London in 1833, Bellini wrote new embellishments for the repeat of Amina's final, aria, the rondo-finale, "Ah! non giunge." They made one of opera's greatest explosions of joy even more joyful. Apparently, Pasta did not perform the variations, but they exist in Bellini's hand, and we heard them.

Thus Teatro Nuovo gave us a standard opera, newly heard.

The semi-staged performance used scenic projections based by Adam J. Thompson, based on the original set designs for La Scala by Alessandro Sanquirico. Lighting design by Stephen Smart and stage action (but no costumes and scanty props) made the production a compelling and un-'konzept'ualized one, in contrast to the Met's last (awful) production about an opera company getting ready to put on *La sonnambula,* or a Santa Fe production I once saw in which Amina ends the opera by drowning herself.
Teatro Nuovo was true to Romani and Bellini—and common sense, trusting the work to be what it is.

The cast was up to the rigors of the music, but did not stun the audience with vocal brilliance as some major singers of the past have. Amina was Teresa Castillo, who has been featured in two previous Teatro Nuovo productions. She has developed the full range of bel canto techniques, the goal of Teatro Nuovo's training program, and she sailed through the difficult, complex variations of "Ah! non giunge" with admirable *sprezzatura,* i.e. effortlessly. Christopher Bozeka, a superb tenor whom I have previously seen in Rossini's *Otello* and as his *Comte Ory,* had some trouble with the very high original keys from time to time—it is one thing to hit those notes occasionally and another to stay in that high altitude all evening. Still, he sang passionately. Abigail Raiford's Lisa was excellent and won enthusiastic and well deserved applause for her rarely heard—and difficult—second aria "De'lieti auguri." Owen Phillipson as Count Rodolfo was fine, although "legato phrasing" does not mean holding onto notes for an overlong time. I also liked Vincent Graña as Alessio, as much for his acting as for his singing.

As in *Macbeth*, the chorus plays a major role in *Sonnambula.* The villagers are a central participant in the action, and the TN Chorus under Chorus Master Derrick Goff, were excellent, acting and singing. The orchestra was led by Elisa Citterio as Primo Violino e Capo d'Orchestra with Will Crutchfield at the Cembalo. They led the period instruments in a sensitive reading of the music, which Crutchfield obviously loves. There were a few flubs by the wind instruments, but the keyed trumpets played their "new" duet especially well. The change from an orchestra led by a Primo Violino as in the 1830 *La sonnambula* to one led by a conductor (as in the 1847 *Macbeth*), was evident in the two performances, which showed the evolution in the role of orchestra leader.

Once more Teatro Nuovo gave us meticulously researched works seen in a new light by returning to old verities: fidelity to the original concepts of instrumentation, vocalization and production values. It is the most exciting way forward for an art form which sometimes seems to be losing its raison d'être.

We saw *Macbeth* on July 19 and *La sonnambula* on the 20th in Montclair, New Jersey. The operas will be repeated in New York the following week.