

OPERA NEWS

IN REVIEW

La Bohème, Romeo and Juliet and *Don Giovanni* Chautauqua Opera 7/7/03, 7/21/03 and 8/1/03

CHAUTAUQUA

Chautauqua Opera ushered in its seventy-fourth season with a new production of Puccini's *La Bohème*, sung in the Martin translation and reset in the 1890s. (Ostensibly this time-shift justified the large Eiffel Tower that dominated Peter Harrison's outer-acts backdrop, though the concept incongruously transported the poor protagonists' garret to a much ritzier neighborhood than the Quartier Latin.) Otherwise, Jay Lesenger's staging respected traditional values and achieved marvels within the limited space of the Norton Hall stage, convincingly bringing out the realism of the dramatic action even in the crowded Café Momus scene. On July 7, it took tenor Robert Breault half an act to bring his considerable resources into focus, but by the time he arrived at "Che gelida manina," his Rodolfo was riding on a tidal wave of clarion tone that carried him through to the heartbreaking final curtain. If Kristin Clayton's attractive lyric soprano lacked a certain verismo edge, her Mimì was nevertheless charming. Apprentice Eric Strong's Schaunard outclassed Ray Fellman's Marcello in terms of baritonal warmth and expression, while Cara Johnston (Musetta) had the audience in her hand even before singing her waltz. Most impressive of all was Gary Thor Wedow's tight, spotless conducting.

Romeo and Juliet (July 21) smacked more of Shakespeare than of Gounod, performed in Edmund Tracey's translation (originally for English National Opera), on Peter Dean Beck's two-story wooden set, which recalled the Globe Theatre, softened by use of scrim and sensuously lit by Michael Baumgarten. Visually, Dominique Moralez and Sari Gruber made a handsome pair of young lovers; vocally, neither came near to displaying a flair for the French style. Moralez's rare attempts at dynamic shading generally ended in washed-out tone, while his high B-flat at the end of Romeo's aria (the original is in B major, but the transposed version -- more usually performed -- is in B-flat major) and high C at the end of the fight scene were attacked dutifully rather than authoritatively. Gruber smudged much of the florid writing in Juliet's waltz song, and her lyric soprano generally lacked color and contrast, though she did manage to stir up some emotional excitement in the heroine's big aria before the drinking of the fatal potion. In the all-important duets, the singers' voices did not blend so much as move in parallel fashion. Philip Cokorinos's imposing, sonorous Friar Laurence was on a higher vocal plane altogether, while the cast's unevenness was further emphasized by the stentorian, quasi-heldentenor Tybalt (apprentice Steven Sanders). Other apprentices made considerably less impact in the roles of Mercutio, Stephano and the Duke.

Marcie Bazell's staging of the overture as a fight between the Montagues and the Capulets worked to disguise the shallowness of the score's opening pages, and the Act I ball and Act III conflict (both culminating in brilliant tableaux vivants, enhanced by Helen E. Rodgers's colorful Renaissance costumes) were efficiently choreographed by Teddy Kern. James Meena's conducting lacked coherent shape and forward thrust, making a long evening seem, well, long.

If Lesenger's staging of *Don Giovanni* (in Andrew Porter's translation) favored the *dramma* side a tad more than the *giocosa*, it served to strengthen the credibility of the comic elements while intensifying the horror of the rake's fiery demise. (Mozart's abridged version of the epilogue was performed.) Here, the Giovanni (Brian Davis) and the Leporello (Joshua Winograde) possessed equal amounts of physical

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charm and machismo, blurring the masterservant relationship at times but making the identity switch in Act II quite believable; after the sextet, as the exposed Leporello smooth-talked his way to safety, Elvira showed more embarrassment than rage (suggesting that she might have fallen for the imposter). Norbert Kolb's movable iron grills and painted backdrops framed the action attractively and looked as though they were meant to effect the many scenic transformations more swiftly and less noisily than they did on opening night (Aug. 1). Adrienne Webber's creative costuming (with Georgianna Eberhard's expert makeup) allowed bass Cokorinos just enough freedom of movement and facial expression to project a truly frightening Stone Guest.

In his debut traversal of the complete score, Joseph Colaneri conducted heavy-handedly, missed a couple of vocal cues in the ensembles and seemed to find *accompagnatos* a challenge to coordinate. *Secco* recitatives (with the harpsichordist tucked away in a far corner) also proceeded less than nimbly, and a few rough edges in the strings marred otherwise excellent orchestral playing. Colaneri's predilection for snail-paced tempos worked to Davis's advantage in the don's serenade (sung with fine breath control, *mezza voce*) but put Mark A. Thomsen's tenor to the most unflattering test in both of Ottavio's arias.

As Donna Anna, Theresa Hamm-Smith had the grand manner down pat but seemed to have trouble controlling her wide vibrato and staying on pitch. Sheryl Woods captured Elvira's frustration and feistiness to perfection, remaining stoically onstage throughout the catalogue aria to give Leporello a loud slap in the face at its close; Colaneri's surprisingly accelerated pace in "Mi tradi" caused her to steal a few unauthorized breaths and forced an angry -- rather than transfigured -- delivery of the rondo's final statement. Apprentices Lea Woods Friedman (Zerlina) and Erik Kroncke (Masetto) sang and interacted delightfully in all their scenes together.

E. THOMAS GLASOW