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Semiramide

WILMINGTON, DE

Opera Delaware

4/29/17

UNDER BRENDAN COOKE'S LEADERSHIP, Opera Delaware has become a regional company whose plans savvy operagoers far and wide should follow. Starting with last year's Verdi/Boito-based festival—based around Faccio's highly worthwhile *Amleto*—the troupe now fill the wonderfully atmospheric, intimate (1,200 seat) 1871 Grand Opera House with two concentrated weekends a year built around one lesser-known but important opera. This year's candidate, *Semiramide*, opened April 29 to a justified ovation.

Rossini's marvelous Babylonian epic is something only a few of North America's largest companies have dared stage; it returns to the Met next season after an absence of more than two decades. There was heavy cutting—as with Handel, it takes time to acclimatize a general audience to the sheer scope of serious bel canto works. We lost all second verses (even of brilliantly executed duets), the first whole scene for Idreno and Azema (who had no solo lines) and—particularly tough to swallow—Arsace's Act II cavatina before the brilliant two-part cabaletta. But with very creditable leading singers sending off vocal fireworks in the remaining 2 hours, 40 minutes, Dean Anthony's handsome, well-staged production still gave a remarkably enjoyable sense of the piece. Peter Tupitza's clever set centered on a unit with a gate and zigzagged ascending pathways plausible for a throne room, Nino's tomb and the (not unduly verdant) Hanging Gardens. A starry background sometimes obtained, the contrasting daytime scenes being keenly lit with considerable variety of shade and texture by Driscoll Otto. I suspect Howard Tsvi Kaplan's brightly colored costumes derive from a *Nabucco* staging, but they worked very well here.

The singers took full advantage of the Grand's flattering acoustic for singing ottocento music. Lindsay Ohse brought accomplished control and a bright, pretty (if somewhat generic "American coloratura") sound to *Semiramide*, taking some of the Sutherland options in interpolations, upward cadenzas and transpositions. Her passagework was impressively fleet and precise, and she moved with grace and command, though looking too youthful to have a son old enough to command an army. That son, Arsace, proved a revelation in Aleksandra Romano's thrilling performance, marked by live-wire individual mezzo timbre, physical commitment and eloquent phrasing: a young artist to watch. Relishing his character's wickedness, Daniel Mobbs' fine, fierce Assur—honed at Caramoor, 2009—proved totally at ease in Rossini's roulades and trills but also impressed with his mastery of legato and—rare in this role—soft dynamics in the proto-Verdian mad scene. His and Ohse's psychologically dept Act II face-off won sustained audience cheers. Wide-ranging tenor Timothy Augustin sang what remained of Idreno's part very capably indeed. Neither in verbal expression nor timbre did his prince much suggest romance; though young, he'd suit the high-flying "Rossini fathers" in *Tancredi* and *Maometto II* to perfection. Basses Harold Wilson (Oroë) and Young-Bok Kim (Nino's ghost) boomed imposingly and served the drama. Despite occasional opening night infelicities, Anthony Barrese's players performed generously. What a pleasure to hear an unstaged overture! Barrese presided judiciously over the complex ensembles and managed to suppress all but two anachronistic long-held high notes (one by each leading man, otherwise very stylish). The festival also included a staged *Cenerentola* and an attractively-cast *Petite messe solennelle*. Amtrak stops within minutes of the Grand; those who 'travel for opera' should watch to see where artistic ambition leads Opera Delaware next Spring. —David Shengold

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