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Odyssey Opera shares rarely heard delights

By **Steve Smith** | Globe Staff June 13, 2014



Not every piece of music cast into history's dustbin deserves to be there — a point made forcefully and playfully by Odyssey Opera in its inaugural June Festival at the Boston University Theatre on Wednesday and Thursday nights. Introduced last September with a lauded concert account of Wagner's "Rienzi," the resourceful young company made its first foray into staged productions with a pair of events devoted to three Italian operas more familiar from hearsay than actually heard.

Concerning Verdi's "Un giorno di regno" ("King for a Day"), a bad reputation is misleading. A larky comedy about the doings of the cavalier Belfiore, deputized as a stand-in for the in-hiding king of Poland, the opera was a flop scrapped after its premiere. Verdi nearly gave up altogether.

Happily, he regrouped and resumed his march toward magnificence. Still, "Giorno," a work made hastily, saddled with an untidy libretto and, by reports of the

day, performed poorly, was a victim of its bad press — a clutch of latter-day revivals notwithstanding.

Taking in an airy, economical new production on Wednesday, directed by Joshua Major and conducted by Odyssey artistic and general director Gil Rose, you recognized immediately that "Giorno" is not top-flight Verdi. Rossini and Donizetti loom large; the composer of "La Traviata" and "Otello" is barely there. The opera amounts to a bel canto B movie, its best gestures almost wholly borrowed.

Still, B movies can be good fun. So, too, is "Giorno," when invested with the kind of insightful directing, committed acting, and stylish playing it received here. Major prepared his cast carefully and well; what might have descended into slapstick and mugging instead courted whimsy while never pandering.

Michael Chioldi, a bigger than life Belfiore, set the tone for what was best in this account with his robust singing and boisterous presence. The rest of the cast rose to his level to varying degrees. Amy Shoremount-Obra sang gorgeously as his befuddled lover, the Marchesa del Poggio, though the character provides more potential for devilish fun than she seemed to find. (See Anna Caterina Antonacci in a giddy 2010 Parma revival on DVD for a blazing realization.)

Jessica Medoff was a sweetly buoyant Giulietta, daughter of the Barone di Kelbar (James Maddalena), whose marriage to stiff state treasurer La Rocca (David Kravitz) is averted by the royal pretender. Yeghishe Manucharyan, as Edoardo — La Rocca's nephew, Giulietta's true love — uncorked his tight, white tenor reliably. The Barone suited Maddalena ideally, his mutually assured destruction showdown with Kravitz a highlight. A well-prepared chorus sealed the deal.

Thursday's program comprised two one-act operas rarer still: "Zanetto" by Pietro Mascagni, best known for the warhorse "Cavalleria Rusticana," and "Il segreto di Susanna" by Ermanno Wolf-Ferrari, best known for interludes that used to turn up on pops concerts. Director Daniel Gidron staged both with taste and imagination.

"Zanetto," presented in Boston in 1902 by Mascagni as impresario — an occasion ending in his arrest! — is rich with autumnal sentiment. Silvia, movingly acted and sung here by Eleni Calenos, is a courtesan past her sell-by date. Approached by Zanetto, an ardent young minstrel strikingly enacted and voiced by Eve Gigliotti, Silvia gently misdirects her would-be suitor.

Two fine singers on a stark stage, buffeted and caressed by the orchestra — what could be more touching? On this evidence, the work's neglect for reasons other than practicality baffled. You could imagine a revival suited to, say, Renée Fleming and any number of striking modern-day mezzo-soprano stars.

Wolf-Ferrari, declared a household name in a 1912 New York Times review of "Susanna" starring Geraldine Farrar, is anything but now. The biggest surprise of Odyssey's presentation, then, was that this was the offering that seemed to engage the audience most: Laughter, well warranted, was loud and contagious.

Dramatically, the piece is a trifle. Gil, a moralistic baron portrayed here by Kristopher Irmiter with rousing voice and comical countenance, smells tobacco smoke in his home, and suspects his young wife, Susanna — Inna Dukach, pealing and adorable — of conducting an extramarital affair. (Actually, she's sneaking puffs while he's away.)

Gil's stuffy pronouncements and Susanna's blissed-out impressions of cerulean mists — accompanied by music pungent, punning, and attuned to every dramatic opportunity — made for rich comedy. Abetted by sharp-witted mute contributions from Steven Goldstein as household servant Sante, Irmiter and Dukach burned up the stage. The audience responded eagerly, even uproariously.

And here, already, was a test of a young orchestra's range. Having excelled in blithe, snappy Verdi juvenilia one night before, the players now had to produce Mascagni's roseate glow and

Wolf-Ferrari's cinematic charm. Under Rose's guidance, the orchestra ticked both boxes effectively.

All three operas were staged on variations of the same spare set: a mix of faux-stone platforms and columns, with a rear-stage frame in "Giorno" and "Zanetto" hoisted to the ceiling for "Segreto." Presumably meant for thrift, the common space also glued together a festival populated with misfit operas about misdirection and disguise. All told, it was an auspicious start for what promises to be a vital company.

"Il giorno di regno" repeats on Friday, and "Zanetto" and "Il segreto di Susanna" repeat on Saturday, at the Boston University Theatre. 617-933-8600, <http://www.odysseyopera.org>