

The Boston Globe

Published June 8, 2014

Rose conducts rarities in Odyssey Opera's theatrical debut

By Harlow Robinson



Amy Shoremount-Obra and Michael Chioldi in rehearsal for Giuseppe Verdi's "Un giorno di regno."

Running an American opera company these days — or any days, really — is not for the faint of heart. In October 2013, the venerable New York City Opera folded after protracted death throes brought about by poor management and a souring financial climate. Opera companies in Cleveland, Baltimore, and San Antonio have also shut down in recent years. Last month, San Diego Opera was rescued only by dramatic last-minute fund-raising. And here in Boston, one of our two major companies, Opera Boston, ceased operation abruptly in mid-season in December 2011.

But the good local news is that from the ashes, a new enterprise has arisen: Odyssey Opera. Guided by Gil Rose, Opera Boston's perennially optimistic former artistic director, it is in his words a "smaller and leaner operation." Odyssey started operations last September, with an acclaimed concert version of Richard Wagner's influential early blockbuster, "Rienzi." And on Wednesday, the company unveils its first mini-festival, for which Rose will conduct four performances featuring two different programs, including three different operas. All are unfairly neglected works by famous Italian masters, not seen or heard in Boston for many moons. From beloved Verdi comes the early, full-length comic romp "Un giorno di regno" ("King for a Day"). The second program offers two one-acts: "Zanetto" by Pietro Mascagni and "Il segreto di Susanna" ("Susanna's Secret") by Ermanno Wolf-Ferrari. All will be performed in Italian with projected English supertitles.

In a recent interview, Rose said that the choice of these operas, none of them standard repertoire items, reflects his new company's philosophy. "We chose the name 'Odyssey' because we wanted to project the idea of going on a journey to a place where you have never been. People do want to experience operas they don't know. I've always been ravenous for music that no one else cares about. I'm crazy enough to think everyone else should love what I do." To reduce expenses, Rose opted to find pieces with small casts. Both "Zanetto" and "Il segreto di Susanna" require only two singers, and even the cast for the Verdi is relatively small. In another economical move, all three operas will be staged within a single basic framed set.

Perhaps the most intriguing rediscovery at hand is Mascagni's "Zanetto." Completed in 1896, seven years after the composer's smash hit, "Cavalleria rusticana," this chamber-size piece perplexed critics and audiences. Its languid charm and psychological nuance were too subtle for large opera houses. The libretto adapted a French play that once served as a vehicle for Sarah Bernhardt, cross-dressing in the title role of a wandering male minstrel. In what he originally called a "lyric scene," Mascagni also creates Zanetto as a "pants role" for mezzo-soprano. The other character is Silvia, a soprano, an aging courtesan in the countryside outside Renaissance-era Florence, weary of life and love. That is, until handsome Zanetto appears beneath her window, singing a lilting serenade (one of Mascagni's great tunes). What follows is an extended dialogue that ebbs and flows as the two engage in a Freudian battle of sexual wits. The lush orchestration often sounds like source material for Nino Rota's score for "The Godfather." Eve Gigliotti will appear as Zanetto, and Eleni Calenos as Silvia.

For Rose, "Zanetto" is an "odd jewel. It's true that not much happens. The characters are like ships passing in the night, meandering around the stage. When one is ready to take the plunge, the other is not. But there is so much wonderful music, and Zanetto's serenade — accompanied by harp — should have become a famous tune. Anyone who loves Puccini will love this piece."

"Il segreto di Susanna" (1909) is something quite different — a zany comedy about cigarettes. Rather, about women smoking cigarettes, an activity considered risqué and liberated around 1900. Count Gil (baritone), husband to Countess Susanna (soprano), believes his wife is cheating on him because he smells cigarette smoke around the house. But she is the culprit — so he takes up smoking too. The opera's most famous music is the overture; the rest alludes to opera buffa and even Debussy (the woodwind phrases representing cigarette smoke). Inna Dukach and Kristopher Irmiter star in the Odyssey production. Daniel Gidron directs both this and "Zanetto."

Long neglected after a disastrous 1840 Milan premiere, Verdi's jolly "Un giorno di regno" has been receiving more attention recently, inspired by the bicentennial in 2013 of the composer's birth. Set in Poland in 1733, the madcap plot revolves around disguise and mistaken identity. In a recent essay in Opera News, musicologist Philip Gossett enthuses over the opera's merits but admits that it "simply goes on too long" and repeats rather too much. The score has often been cut in performance. Rose is following this practice, but cautiously: "If Verdi wrote it, who am I to question the repeat?" Joshua Major, chair of opera studies at New England Conservatory, directs for his Odyssey Opera debut.

Rose confesses he feels some nerves as he launches another operatic venture, but says he has learned some lessons from the painful demise of Opera Boston. "The mistake we made was we didn't realize we were a boutique product, and we got overextended," he says. "Now I know that the scale of the company has to drive the repertoire we choose, and not the other way around."

More information:

ODYSSEY OPERA

Gil Rose, conductor

Giuseppe Verdi

"Un giorno di regno" June 11, 13

Pietro Mascagni

"Zanetto"

Ermanno Wolf-Ferrari

"Il segreto di Susanna"

June 12, 14

At: Boston University Theatre

Tickets \$25-\$100 617-933-8600 www.odysseyopera.org