

HOME
COMMENTARY
FEATURED OPERAS
NEWS
REPERTOIRE
REVIEWS
ABOUT
CONTACT
LINKS
SEARCH SITE

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Three Rossini Operas Series

Rossini's serious operas once dominated opera houses across the Western world. In their librettos, the great French author Stendahl—then a diplomat in Italy and the composer's first biographer—saw a post-Napoleonic "martial vigor" that could spark a liberal revolution. In their vocal and instrumental innovations, he discerned a similar revolution in music.

Tosca: Stark Drama at the Chandler Pavilion

On Thursday evening April 27, 2017, Los Angeles Opera presented a revival of Giacomo Puccini's *Tosca* at the Dorothy Chandler Pavilion. In 2013, director John Caird had given Angelinos a production that made *Tosca* a full-blooded, intense drama as well as a most popular aria-studded opera. His Floria was a dove among hawks.

San Jose's Bohemian Rhapsody

Opera San Jose has capped a wholly winning season with an emotionally engaging, thrillingly sung, enticingly fresh rendition of Puccini's immortal masterpiece *La bohème*.

Fine *Traviata* Completes SDO Season

On Saturday evening April 22, 2017, San Diego Opera presented Giuseppe Verdi's *La traviata* at the Civic Theater. Director Marta Domingo updated the production from the constrictions of the nineteenth century to the freedom of the nineteen twenties. Violetta's fellow courtesans and their dates wore fascinating outfits and, at one point, danced the Charleston to what looked like a jazz combo playing Verdi's score.

The Exterminating Angel: compulsive repetitions and re-enactments

Thomas Adès's third opera, *The Exterminating Angel*, is a dizzying, sometimes frightening, palimpsest of texts (literary and cinematic) and music, in which ceaseless repetitions of the past - inexact, ever varying, but inescapably compulsive - stultify the present and deny progress into the future. Paradoxically, there is endless movement within a constricting stasis. The essential elements collide in a surreal Sartrean dystopia: beasts of the earth (live sheep and a simulacra of a bear) roam, a disembodied hand floats through the air, water spouts from the floor and a burning cello provides the flames upon which to roast the sacrificial lambs. No wonder that when the elderly Doctor tries to restore order through scientific rationalism he is told, "We don't want reason! We want to get out of here!"

Dutch National Opera revives deliciously dark satire *A Dog's Heart*

Is *A Dog's Heart* even an opera? It is sung by opera singers to live music. Alexander Raskatov's score, however, is secondary to the incredible stage visuals. Whatever it is, actor/director Simon McBurney's first stab at opera is fantastic theatre. Its revival at Dutch National Opera, where it premiered in 2010, is hugely welcome.

María José Moreno lights up the Israeli Opera with *Lucia di Lammermoor*

I kept hearing from knowledgeable opera fanatics that the Israeli Opera (IO) in Tel Aviv was a surprising sure bet. So I made my way to the Homeland to hear how supposedly great the quality of opera was. And man, I was in for treat.

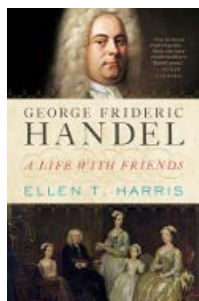
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06 May 2017

Three Rossini Opere Serie

Rossini's serious operas once dominated opera houses across the Western world. In their librettos, the great French author Stendahl—then a diplomat in Italy and the composer's first biographer—discerned a post-Napoleonic "martial vigor" that could spark a liberal revolution. In their vocal and instrumental innovations, he saw a similar revolution in music.

Yet today these works cling precariously to the repertoire. Each year, on the average, each receives one or two staged productions across the globe. Perhaps it is the looming 150th anniversary of Rossini's death that explains an unusual opportunity to hear Rossini's first and last works in this genre: *Tancredi* at Opera Philadelphia and *Semiramide* both at Opera Delaware in Wilmington and the Bayerische Staatsoper in München. I had not heard either one live on stage since Marilyn Horne headed casts in the 1980s.

Any company seeking to perform Rossini's serious works today faces two challenges. One is that many contemporary spectators find the style archaic. *Libretti* written in a mannered literary style inherited from the Baroque are set to intricately stylized *bel canto* musical scores, often of Wagnerian length. To be sure, Rossini's *opera serie* contain an exceptionally broad range of intense passions and conflicts, yet the characters enacting them seem to be archetypal monarchs and aristocrats from days gone by obsessed with

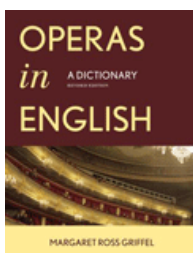
Three Rossini Operas Series

A review by Andrew Moravcsik

Above: Gioachino Rossini [Photo by Etienne Carjat, 1865, courtesy of [Wikipedia](#)]

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Cinderella Enchants Phoenix

At Phoenix's Symphony Hall on Friday evening April 7, Arizona Opera offered its final presentation of the 2016-2017 season, Gioachino Rossini's *Cinderella* (*La Cenerentola*). The stars of the show were Daniela Mack as Cinderella, called Angelina in the opera, and Alek Shrader as Don Ramiro. Actually, Mack and Shrader are married couple who met singing these same roles at San Francisco Opera.

LA Opera's Young Artist Program Celebrates Tenth Anniversary

On Saturday evening April 1, 2017, Plácido Domingo and Los Angeles Opera celebrated their tenth year of training young opera artists in the Domingo-Colburn-Stein Program. From the singing I heard, they definitely have something of which to be proud.

Extravagant Line-up 2017-18 at Festspielhaus in Baden-Baden, Germany

The town's name itself "Baden-Baden" (named after Count Baden) sounds already enticing. Built against the old railway station, its Festspielhaus programs the biggest stars in opera for Germany's largest auditorium. A Mecca for music lovers, this festival house doesn't have its own ensemble, but through its generous sponsoring brings the great productions to the dreamy idylle.

Gerhaher and Bartoli take over Baden-Baden's Festspielhaus

The Festspielhaus in Baden-Baden pretty much programs only big stars. A prime example was the Fall Festival this season. Grigory Sokolov opened with a piano recital, which I did not attend. I came for Cecilia Bartoli in Bellini's *Norma* and Christian Gerhaher with Schubert's *Die Winterreise*, and Anne-Sophie Mutter breathtakingly delivering Mendelssohn's Violin Concerto together with the London Philharmonic Orchestra. Robin Ticciati, the ballerino conductor, is not my favorite, but together they certainly impressed in Mendelssohn.

Mahler Symphony no 8 : Jurowski, LPO, Royal Festival Hall, London

Mahler as dramatist! Mahler Symphony no 8 with Vladimir Jurowski and the London Philharmonic Orchestra at the Royal Festival Hall. Now we know why Mahler didn't write opera. His music is inherently theatrical, and his dramas lie not in narrative but in internal metaphysics. The Royal Festival Hall itself played a role, literally, since the singers moved round the performance space, making the music feel particularly fluid and dynamic. This was no ordinary concert.

Rameau's *Les fêtes d'Hébé*, ou *Les talens lyriques*: a charming French-UK collaboration at the RCM

Imagine a *fête galante* by Jean-Antoine Watteau brought to life, its colour and movement infusing a bucolic scene with charm and theatricality. Jean-Philippe Rameau's *opéra-ballet Les fêtes d'Hébé*, ou *Les talens lyriques*, is one such amorous pastoral allegory, its three *entrées* populated by shepherds and sylvans, real characters such as Sapho and mythological gods such as Mercury.

St Matthew Passion: Armonico Consort and Ian Bostridge

Whatever one's own religious or spiritual beliefs, Bach's *St Matthew Passion* is one of the most, perhaps the most, affecting depictions of the torturous final episodes of Jesus Christ's mortal life

preserving their honor.

Just a few decades after Rossini stopped composing, Verdi operas like *Rigoletto* and *Il trovatore* converted audiences to the modern belief that tragedy must be terse, hard, direct, and drawn from everyday life. Verdi swiftly supplanted Rossini on world stages, and he has gone down in history as the epochal musical innovator and great tragedian—as well as the harbinger of Italian national unity. Today's audiences share this view: they find Rossinian comedy as natural—*Barbiere* and *Cenerentola* remain as popular as ever—but his tragedies foreign.

Yet aficionados know that the intricately stylized vocal expression of *bel canto* tragedy is, in fact, its strength. The need to bridge an extreme distance between style and substance drives singers to intense improvisation and interpretation—and powerful, idiosyncratically personal performances result. Displays of vocal virtuosity, at times bordering on the impossible, can drive audiences into a frenzy.

Yet the deeper purpose of these vocal acrobatics is to express extreme human emotion. In Rossinian opera, the longer the phrases, the more intricate the embellishments, the more creative the vocal coloring, the higher the dramatic tension. In great performances of *bel canto* opera—as with classical ballet, Shakespearean drama, jazz, or any other stylized performance art—these physical demands seem to disappear in the moment, and the listener perceives highly stylized improvisation as the most natural and immediate way to express powerful human passion.

Yet therein lies a second challenge that helps explain why so few opera houses today perform Rossini's *opere serie*. No operatic genre is more closely associated with individual vocal greatness. In every generation, only a few, truly exceptional singers possess the extraordinary technique and interpretive creativity to transform acrobatic vocal improvisation into searing drama. These operas were brought back to life a half century ago largely due to a few such artists: Maria Callas, Joan Sutherland, Montserrat Caballé, Beverly Sills, June Anderson, Marilyn Horne, Gioletta Simionato, Juan-Diego Florez, Samuel Ramey among them. Without such singers, operas like *Tancredi* and *Semiramide* just seem musty, repetitive, and exceedingly long.

Opera Philadelphia, the Bayerische Staatsoper and Opera Delaware are all innovative companies that often take chances on unusual repertoire. The recent productions I witnessed illustrate three distinctive ways to cope with the demands of performing serious Rossini opera in the 21st century.

* * *

Tancredi was Rossini's first mega-hit: its premiere in 1813 established him, at the seemingly impossible age of 20, as the world's leading composer of opera. Yet it is clearly the work of a young man. The score, while fresh and vibrant, is filled with uncomplicated melodies in major keys. The libretto is thin, based on characters who combat misunderstanding rather than intrinsic evil, violence or weakness. Rossini's own ambivalence is evidenced by the existence of two versions with different endings, one happy and one sad.

To breathe life into this drama, Opera Philadelphia assembled a promising cast of singers. Yet success in staging Rossini demands more.

The production was built around veteran mezzo Stephanie Blythe's debut in the title role. Blythe's wide repertoire, resonant voice, and commitment to

on earth: simultaneously harrowing and beautiful, juxtaposing tender stillness with tragic urgency.

Pop Art with Abdellah Lasri in Berliner Staatsoper's marvelous *La bohème*

Lindy Hume's sensational *La bohème* at the Berliner Staatsoper brings out the moxie in Puccini. Abdellah Lasri emerged as a stunning discovery. He floored me with his tenor voice through which he embodied a perfect Rodolfo.

New opera *Caliban* banal and wearisome

Listening to Moritz Eggert's *Caliban* is the equivalent of watching a flea-ridden dog chasing its own tail for one-and-half hours. It scratches, twitches and yelps. Occasionally, it blinks pleadingly, but you can't bring yourself to care for such a foolish animal and its less-than-tragic plight.

Two rarities from the Early Opera Company at the Wigmore Hall

A large audience packed into the Wigmore Hall to hear the two Baroque rarities featured in this melodious performance by Christian Curnyn's Early Opera Company. One was by the most distinguished 'home-grown' eighteenth-century musician, whose music - excepting some of the lively symphonies - remains seldom performed. The other was the work of a Saxon who - despite a few ups and downs in his relationship with the 'natives' - made London his home for forty-five years and invented that so English of genres, the dramatic oratorio.

Enchanting *Tales* at L A Opera

On March 24, 2017, Los Angeles Opera revived its co-production of Jacques Offenbach's *The Tales of Hoffmann* which has also been seen at the Mariinsky Opera in Leningrad and the Washington National Opera in the District of Columbia.

Ermonela Jaho in a stunning *Butterfly* at Covent Garden

Ermonela Jaho is fast becoming a favourite of Covent Garden audiences, following her acclaimed appearances in the House as Mimi, Manon and Suor Angelica, and on the evidence of this terrific performance as Puccini's Japanese ingénue, Cio-Cio-San, it's easy to understand why. Taking the title role in the first of two casts for this fifth revival of Moshe Leiser's and Patrice Caurier's 2003 production of *Madame Butterfly*, Jaho was every inch the love-sick 15-year-old: innocent, fresh, vulnerable, her hope unfaltering, her heart unwavering.

Brave but flawed world premiere: *Fortress Europe* in Amsterdam

Calliope Tsoupanaki's latest opera, *Fortress Europe*, premiered as spring began taming the winter storms in the Mediterranean.

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deep characterization has propelled her into the ranks of world-class singers. Convincing her to debut the role in Philadelphia is a coup.

Yet Blythe's years of portraying deep and heavy roles such as Fricka, Azucena, Ulrica, and Mrs. Quickly seem to have taken their toll on her voice. Today she lacks the agility and natural lightness required for Rossini's music, composed decades earlier. Blythe gave it her all, yet her admirably intense portrayal psychologically could not obscure smudged runs, uneven timbre from top to bottom, labored vocal production, and a voice that just seemed too broad for the role—though I am told her later performances added more polish.

Brenda Rae, cast as Amenaide, the young woman in love with Tancredi, went to the opposite extreme. A young American soprano who has recently been quite successful in Europe, Rae possesses an extremely smooth and delicate soprano voice with astonishing command of fine gradations between *piano*, *pianissimo* and *pianississimo*. Her use of these talents displayed a fine dramatic imagination, yet the role ultimately demands more vocal variety, more edge to the voice, and a bolder characterization.

In the same interpretive universe was Michele Angelini as Amenaide's father Argirio. This American-trained tenor is a singer on his way up after successful outings at the MET and Glimmerglass. Yet here the voice sounded insecure and stressed, especially in higher registers. Baritone Daniel Mobbs integrated acting and singing into a solid musical-dramatic portrayal of the warring clan leader Orbazzano—particularly strong when singing ensembles.

Overall, the stylistic discrepancies between Blythe, Rae, Angelini and Mobbs, and were jarring in a way that further impeded musical coherence—and neither the stage direction and conducting restored it. *Tancredi*, more often performed in concert than staged, requires little more than serviceable unit set with a few accessories. It did receive that, though the constant movement of furniture, obviously meant to add variety, proved an intermittent annoyance. Conductor Corrado Rovaris held the show together musically. Yet the orchestra seemed under-rehearsed and—as seems often to happen under Rovaris—the mood excessively cautious. With unusually slow and steady tempi, slack rhythms and little Rossinian verve, even the famous overture made little impact.

* * *

Semiramide at the Bayerische Staatsoper in München, one of the world's great companies, seemed a sure winner. The Staatsoper secured the services of a talented young Italian conductor, Michele Mariotti, whose father used to run the Rossini Festival in Pesaro and under whose direction the celebrated München orchestra played brilliantly. It also mustered nearly as fine a cast as one can find in the world today. To top things off, it commissioned a new staging from David Alden. The result was impressive and memorable—but in some respects too much of a good thing.

The singers largely fulfilled their promise. The main attraction was mezzo-soprano Joyce DiDonato's role debut as *Semiramide*, the sinful and doomed Assyrian queen. This is unusual casting these days: in recent years, coloratura sopranos have appropriated the role. München returned to Rossini's original intent in writing the opera for Isabella Colbran, who, like DiDonato today, was a mezzo with a warmer and darker middle voice coupled to a flexible extension into soprano heights.

DiDonato is great artist at the prime of her career. Her technical ability to deliver nearly any dynamic, color and attack as needed is marvelous. In middle of her range, the voice as luscious as one can imagine. At times the rougher sound of a mezzo, a slight strain when singing high at *forte*, and obvious efforts to lend psychological weight to specific lines seemed a bit jarring—particularly for those brought up on those smooth-sailing soprano

Semiramides. Yet this clearly fit DiDonato's conception of the character as a powerful Machiavellian queen and a guilt-ridden family member as well as a seductive woman—and she was prepared to sacrifice some smoothness of line to portray Semiramide's inner anguish.

The other truly world-class assumption was that of American tenor Lawrence Brownlee. He brought effortless virtuosity to the role of Idreno, an Indian suitor to the queen. His pinpoint accuracy in coloratura and sweet and relaxed tone in more sustained passages added up--despite being stripped of an aria--to a clear musical interpretation and emotional characterization.

Trieste-born mezzo Daniela Barcellona has sung, and indeed recorded, the role of Arsace for some time. Her voice is not what it once was, but it remains an impressive instrument that comes through when it has to. She stood up mezzo-to-mezzo with DiDonato, though some of her solo numbers (further hampered by being placed upstage) made less impact. In smaller parts, Christophoros Stamboglis sang in stentorian bass tones appropriate to the high priest Oroe, while Elsa Benoit radiated innocence as Azema.

That leaves Italian bass-baritone Alex Esposito, who sang powerfully and pointedly as the villainous Assur. Though his voice at times lacked true bass color, smoothness of line, and accuracy of coloratura, Esposito acted up a storm, strutting around in military uniform, stripping half-naked, writhing and clambering across the stage, taking an ax to a desk, and much more. He deserved an A for effort.

Esposito's antics bring us to the weakness of the performance, namely the new production. Staging and the ideas underlying them are always a big deal in Germany. It was doubly so in this case, because stage director David Alden was long something of a "house director" in München, well-known for his controversially updated take on Wagner. Now he has turned to *bel canto* opera and, after ten years, this brings him back to town.

Alden is an energetic, imaginative and visually gifted director who has mastered the art of staging opera as post-modern pastiche. His productions are riots of diverse styles, symbols and analogies—including, as is so often the case with contemporary opera direction, ironic commentary on much that the characters sing—and some things they do not.

This *Semiramide* is no exception. Most of the opera is set in a North Korean-style mausoleum dominated by a giant statue of a deceased political leader—to judge from the image, it is some combination of Kim-II-Sung, Donald Trump and Saddam Hussein—with his hand raised, surrounded by heroic frescos of his life. The statue—a visual updating of King Nino, whose ghost does appear in the opera—was visually quite striking, even if its deeper meaning remained elusive.

The bewildering array of unnamed characters who populated Alden's mausoleum did not clarify things. Alongside Babylonians, as per the libretto, were book-waving Sufi Berbers, strutting authoritarian military generals, sparkingly exotic princes, black-clad mimes, ax-wielding French foreign legionnaires dressed as butchers, and childhood Doppelgängers of the main characters.

Alden has said he sought to portray the psychological horror of religious fundamentalism, which tears children from their parents, encourages crimes of vengeance, and spreads debilitating guilt. Of course this is not what *Semiramide* is principally about, but sometimes ambitious efforts at "strong misdirection" spark deep insights. This was, I believe, the case in Alden's earlier Wagner productions. Here, however, even after reading lengthy essays in the program, I remained more confused than ever.

Yet a far deeper weakness of the production lies in the fundamental incompatibility between Alden's manic direction and the natural flow of *bel*

canto opera. Alden is stone deaf to the most important imperative of directing *bel canto* opera: less is more. As discussed above, the leisurely and repetitive style of *bel canto* opera is a deliberate invitation to singers (and, sometimes, also to the orchestra) to creatively embellish the music, thereby elaborating more fully the characters' emotions.

Alden compulsively obscures precisely those critical moments. The moment a singer reaches a second verse, a final coda or a cabaletta, or even sometimes a contrasting middle section, Alden sends in the clowns. Choristers, minor characters, dancers and extraneous actors stagger—and sometimes the singers themselves—around like zombies, sneak up on the singers from behind, writhe in anguish, wave props, turn pirouettes, shuffle in slow motion, walk up walls, and smash furniture. Sometimes the set itself mimics the action: walls move or pastel cartoon butterflies flit across giant screens. Alden appears to view such moments as empty or redundant and thus in need of directorial intervention, but the constant commotion renders it almost impossible to focus on the vocal line at what should be precisely the moments of greatest musical tension.

Such distractions sap musical expressiveness and integrity. A typical example is Idreno's big Act 2 aria ("La speranza più soave"). Lawrence Brownlee sang of amorous joy expressively and introspectively, adding miraculous roulades and ornaments—all bathed in a lovely tenor timbre. It was a performance of this difficult aria unsurpassed in modern times. Yet he had to share the stage with eleven dancers in sparkled exotic costumes striking Broadway poses, dozens of choristers in burkas shuffling back and forth, and two black-clad stagehands who rapidly dressed and undressed the ingénue soprano. In the end, to add insult to injury, he was obliged to carry the soprano off-stage on his back. A relatively discerning audience was so distracted from the singing that Brownlee received only short and tepid applause.

To see what might have been, we need only consider the immediately preceding number, a celebrated duet between Semiramide and Arsace in which son and mother find a fleeting moment of peace and reconciliation even though fate decrees that he must kill her. I do not know why this is the only place where Alden abstained, but no extra characters or scenic changes appeared. We simply saw two nearly motionless characters clutching one another on a large stage, expressing their deepest longings. Suddenly the theater seemed to shrink and the music seemed to connect listeners directly to the human essence of the characters. The audience responded with a stunned moment of silence and then erupted into the longest ovation of the night.

* * *

At first glance, Opera Delaware's *Semiramide* was the least promising of the three productions I attended. Wilmington is a town of 70,000 struggling with urban renewal and Opera Delaware a modest company. To be sure, it has made something of a name for itself recently in debuting obscure works: last year Franco Faccio's *Amleto* (*Hamlet*). Yet it is presenting only two performances of *Semiramide*—alternating with *La Cenerentola* in a one-week spring festival format. In an operatic world where fidelity to the score has become a fetish, Opera Delaware boldly (and quite successfully) cuts almost an hour of music. The singers are not global opera stars and the orchestra lacks the BMW-quality tonal sheen of the München pit band. The staging is rudimentary: singers in bright costumes stand on small, abstract unit set (a bit like the bridge of the Starship Enterprise), lit in changing colors.

Performing one of the grandest of Rossini operas under such conditions seems quixotic. Yet someone is doing things right in Wilmington. In many respects, this was most consistently satisfying of the three performances I attended. It added up to far more than the sum of its parts, communicating the intense music drama at the heart of *Semiramide*.

A critical factor is the venue. I can think of no place in America I would rather hear this type of opera than Wilmington's Grand Opera House. Like its counterparts in Philadelphia and München, this is an ornate 19th century auditorium—but half the size and constructed of lovely painted wood. Glyndebourne and a few other venues show us that about 1000 seats is ideal for modern performances of 18th and early 19th century repertoire.

All of this gives the Grand uniquely intimate acoustics. From the first orchestral downbeat, astonishingly warm and vivid sound envelopes the listener. A deep and relatively small orchestral pit with an overhang favors the voices, which seem far more immediate and resonant than in almost any other house. Italian diction and subtle textual emphases are so clear that even those reliant on the supertitles can easily catch the nuances. The fine acoustics are matched by clear and short sight lines.

Where the Philadelphia singers were vocally mismatched and those in München often overwhelmed by directorial distractions, those in Wilmington—thrown together on a small, simple stage—convey their emotions to each other and to the audience as if it were spoken dialogue in the most realistic of modern dramas. Stylistic distance disappears. Angry or sarcastic characters spit the musical embellishments at one another. Affectionate ones sinuously meld their tones. Joyous ones launch exuberant vocal fireworks. This is Rossinian opera as it was meant to be experienced.

Contributing decisively to the success of the Delaware *Semiramide* is also the conducting of the young American Rossini specialist, Anthony Barrese. He inspires the orchestra to play with distinctive Rossinian articulation, phrasing, rhythmic pulse and exuberance—even if the players concede some tonal gloss to the great opera orchestras of bigger houses. The opening night timing of vocal entrances is impeccable—in part, perhaps, because someone had the good sense to book the same cast to perform the opera (as a concert performance in Baltimore) twice with piano less than a month ago

Opera Delaware has also assembled a cast of promising young singers, all about a decade into their careers—each enthusiastic, accomplished, and versed in *bel canto* style. Collectively, they demonstrate the remarkable breath and depth of American opera training.

The first voice one hears is that of Indiana-trained bass Harold Wilson, active in recent years in Germany and the US. It is so resonant and full that one is tempted to refocus the entire drama on the high priest. Also impressive in the cameo role of the Ghost of King Nino was Korean-born, New York-trained bass Young-bok Kim.

I last heard Aleks Romano ten years ago, when this Connecticut-born mezzo was an undergraduate (I assume) singing in the chorus of a Zemplinsky double bill at Bard College. As Arbace, she demonstrates that ten years of vocal training at Yale and in young singers' programs has produced remarkable agility, evenness of registers and musical insight—as well as expressive acting. Her performance, and increasingly high-level experience, suggest a singer headed for the top.

Soprano Lindsay Ohse, trained at the University of Kansas, has sung widely for US regional companies. Though she can handle the coloratura, her dark mezzo timbre, balanced against an intermittently metallic top, may portend a future as a more dramatic soprano, as her scheduled debut as Norma next year suggests. Tenor Tim Augustin, in the difficult role of Idreno, displayed impressive interpretive skills and a voice that can be lovely in the middle and top—though technical difficulties and lower-lying parts of the role sometimes proved dangerously challenging. Bass-baritone Daniel Mobbs, whom we already encountered in the Philadelphia *Trancredi*, was an audience favorite—not due to transcendent vocal glamor or precision, but due to enthusiastic

integration of music and drama.

A final participant deserves mention. Whereas spectators in Philadelphia and München were only intermittently and randomly responsive, those in Wilmington engaged from the first moment. The night I attended, they displayed an unerring instinct when to break in with enthusiastic cheers, just as an Italian audience would, and when to be pin-drop silent for long periods of maximum tension. Opera in Wilmington is, as it was in Rossini's day, a communal experience.

I encourage anyone who wants to hear Rossini performed by a polished ensemble in a uniquely appropriate setting to catch the last Opera Delaware performance on, a matinee on May 7. The Grand Opera House, so I found out, is a short stroll (past restaurants and cafés) from the Amtrak station, and thus convenient for anyone on the American Eastern seaboard. Those who long for a more star-studded experience or are curious about David Alden's take on *bel canto* might try to snag one of the few remaining tickets for the Bayerische Staatsoper's festival performances of *Semiramide* in July (not those in June, featuring a different cast) or Covent Garden's November performances in London with DiDonato, Barcellona, Brownlee and others under Antonio Pappano.

Andrew Moravcsik

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