

King Roger, Opera in three acts by Karol Szymanowski
Santa Fe Opera, August 14, 2012

This was a wonderful experience overall – great work, splendid performance, magnificent venue. Opera is above all about music, and this one did not disappoint. First performed in 1926, it is in an angular modern idiom but not dissonant, mostly reminiscent of Richard Strauss, but with echoes of French Impressionists (Ravel, Debussy) and the other Richard, Wagner. This does not mean that it is derivative, only that while being a totally original expression, it relates to a variety of styles that are recognizable and therefore easy to assimilate.

The star of the performance was the orchestra, conducted by Evan Rogister. According to the pre-performance commentary, at 80 musicians it was the largest ever assembled in the pit at Santa Fe. It played flawlessly in all aspects, from delicate woodwind solos to full-bore fortissimo tutti, with a climactic turn in a Bacchanal giving up nothing to the famous one in Saint-Saens’ “Samson and Delilah” – aided by a very energetic and masterful performance by the corps de ballet.

The vocal parts were equally good, given that Szymanowski wrote less than spectacular vocal lines for the male roles. Polish superstar baritone Mariusz Kwiecien owns the title role, and his performance was, as expected, flawless. The tenor part of the Shepherd was sung very well by William Burden, whose Polish diction was amazingly clear (<http://williamburdentenor.com/>). The vocal pyrotechnics, however, are reserved for the soprano role of Roxanna, Roger’s queen, brilliantly sung by Erin Morley (<http://www.erinmorley.com/live/>). Her two star arias, one beginning with a lovely wordless vocalise, were truly spectacular. Unfortunately, her Polish diction was poor, making the words nearly unintelligible. Perhaps not her fault – sopranos are often difficult to understand in any language. For example, the performance of Polish soprano Stefania Woytowicz in the recording of Górecki’s Third Symphony is barely more understandable than that of English-speaking Dawn Upshaw in the blockbuster recording of that work.

The staging was less than spectacular. Most of the cast, including a large chorus, is dressed in period costumes (12th C.), but King Roger incongruously appears in a black waistcoat from the turn of the 20th C, with a crown on his head and wrapped in a crimson royal cloak. Stage settings are minimal, but that does not detract from the experience. The stage backdrop consisted of a flat surface made up of sections which rotate to present one of three images for each of the three acts. It is effective in the Act I, which takes place in a cathedral, and the backdrop represents stained glass windows. In the other acts, the bland monochromatic backgrounds add nothing to the staging. I’m told that for some productions, the back of the stage is left open to show a view of the mountains in the distance – that would probably have been better here for acts 2 and 3. (I’m wondering, however, how do voices project acoustically from a stage without a backdrop?)

Which brings up the subject of the setting of the theater. It is a covered amphitheater without walls, with spectacular views of mountains to either side of the stage. As dusk falls, on one side there is the view of a busy interstate with strings of automobile lights. A truly magical sight.

The weakest aspect of this work is the story. It is supposed to represent a basic conflict of human nature – the struggle of the rational and the emotional, duty and desire, ego and id, the Apollonian and the Dionysian, but it lacks the simple dramatic arc of a struggle of good vs. evil such as in *Tosca* or *Billy Budd*. Roger's kingdom is threatened by the preachings of a lowly Shepherd who proclaims a new god of beauty and pleasure. The populace is divided, some following him, others clamoring for his judgment and execution. Roger's response is ambivalent. At first he banishes the Shepherd, then grants him an audience at which the Shepherd attempts to lure the king to his philosophy. Roxana is drawn to the newcomer and eventually follows him, leaving her king. The opera ends with Roger triumphantly declaring a decision, but it is unstated what that is – acceptance or rejection of the Shepherd.

From the perspective of 80+ years since the opera was first staged, certain inferences come to mind. Perhaps this was Szymanowski's (and his co-librettist cousin Jaroslaw Iwaszkiewicz) prescient expression of the notion that "ideas are weapons," so feared by the autocrats of the second half of the 20th C. The power of this king was shaken by a humble shepherd, just as later the power of Jim Crow would be undermined by a tired domestic worker, and the power of the Evil Empire by a humble electrician in Gdansk, both of whose actions unleashed unstoppable ideas. No matter how Roger decides, his kingdom will never be the same because of the power of ideas.

The experience was enhanced by a sumptuous dinner served under a canopy in beautifully landscaped grounds with mountain views. This was followed by an extensive commentary about the opera.