

OPERA IN WARSAW, 2008

We saw Kurpinski's opera "Krakowiacy and Górale" at the Teatr Wielki. A grand folklore spectacle, sort of a precursor to 20th C. Mazowsze and Śląsk spectacles, but with a semblance of continuous storyline attached. There is a lot of spoken dialog, but overall it is more in the mode of opera rather than operetta. The music from that region is mostly duple-time (Krakowiak, Zbojnicki), but there were some triple-time obereks, mazurkas and waltzes thrown in. Originally set in the late 1700's (it premiered in 1811), this production was modern (one set detail placed it in 1959). The characters were dressed in folk costume, but one Krakowianka wore jeans under her gorset and smoked cigarettes, while the main góral baca, in woolen guńka and trousers, wore not a podhalanski kapelusz but a Texan Stetson. The highlight of the production was a zbojnicki danced a capella, accompanied only by the stomping of the dancers' feet.

Besides the folkloristic color that evokes the soul of a nation in captivity, the opera is a serious commentary about regional rivalries that were tearing the nation apart. It is, in a way, an early expression of the late-19th C. train of thought that perhaps the partitions were a result of a flaw in the Polish national character.

The wonderful stage mechanics of the Teatr Wielki were given a thorough workout – sets rose, fell, rotated, slid left, right, back, forth... Singing was adequate, but then this kind of performance is not about vocal excellence.

A week later we saw Rossini's TANCREDI at the Opera Kameralna, as guests of the Director. Now that was an extraordinary experience! The theater is truly cameral - only seven rows on the main level, with another 4 or 5 on the (non-overhanging) balcony. We sat in row 7, which was still very close to the stage. When the curtain went up, the effect was overwhelming - the figures onstage appeared to be giants. It's not because we were that close to the stage - we've been seated closer without that effect. The reason was that the stage proscenium is only 10-12 feet high, and a human figure reaches to at least half of its height. The usual proscenium with a height of several stories dwarfs the figures onstage, even from the first few rows.

Originally set in the political struggles 11th C. Sicily, this production was dressed in non-descript 19th C. uniforms that hinted at the Italian Risorgimento movement of independence and unification. The singing was truly spectacular. The title role is usually cast as a pant role for contralto or mezzo, but was here sung by Jan Monowid, a male contralto(!) with a HUGE voice capable of some incredible vocal gymnastics. Most the other roles were sung very well. The soprano lead, Gabriela Kaminska, was wonderful, a tall attractive woman with a warm, full, on-pitch voice, no vibrato, that just occasionally tended to shrillness when she pushed the high end. Most of the other roles were terrific, with the weakest being the bass villain. The small all-male chorus was made up of soloists of the repertory company, and sang incredibly well. It was truly amazing to find such vocal excellence in a such small company - perhaps the aural impressions were enhanced by the closeness of the cameral space.