

SEPTEMBER / OCTOBER 2019

## OPERA PHILADELPHIA

### Handel: *Semele*

Handel wrote this during his stay in England, in the period when he was composing both operas and oratorios. This work is sort of a hybrid that spans both genres – equally effective as oratorio and as a fully staged work, as it was done here. Although oratorios usually have a religious theme (Messiah, Solomon, Judas Maccabeus), this was far from the case here – the story is based on Roman mythology (Jupiter and Juno are major characters) and deals with a romantic quadrangle, extra-marital philandering, child out of wedlock, a scheme to murder a romantic rival – the typical fare of secular opera.

The singers were a mixed bag. The title role was sung by soprano Amanda Forsythe. At the outset, her voice, although full and powerful, seemed a little harsh and strident. But as the action progressed, she improved, and by the end of act one she delivered a wonderfully smooth coloratura with dazzling vocal fireworks. Cadmus, Semele's father, was bass Ales Rosen, who hit some sonorous low notes that rattled the rafters. Her intended husband-to-be, forced on her by her father in an arranged marriage, was counter-tenor Tim Mead, with a very pure and smooth voice that was consistent throughout.

Semele's sister Ino was sung by mezzo Daniela Mack, whom we heard last year in the title role of *Italiana in Algeri* in Santa Fe. Then, I found her singing somewhat disappointing – thrilling in the upper register at full volume, but lacking substance in the lower register which is supposed to be the domain of the mezzo. Here again, her higher register was dazzling, but the middle and low registers were uneven. At the outset, she didn't project well in lower tones, but improved in some scenes, only to revert in later ones. Of particular note was her duet with the counter-tenor (with whom she is in love but who spurns her). I had never heard this combination of voices before, and it was wonderful – she managed some glorious, resonant chest tones against his soaring high notes. She also doubled the role of Juno, and here sounded much better overall – it was as if the two roles were performed by two different singers.



The staging was non-descript – costumes were vaguely contemporary (see photo). Set design was minimal, but there was much movement of people onstage. It was definitely not your static Baroque oratorio.

## **Prokofiev: *Love For Three Oranges***

Prokofiev himself described it as an opera “written in French to an Italian subject by a Russian composer for an American audience.” It premiered in Chicago in 1921, in the acoustically perfect Auditorium Theater designed by architects Adler and Sullivan. Here, it was sung in English translation, as it is now usually performed in Anglophone countries.

This is an absurdist farce based on an amalgamation of Italian fairy tales, but with elements of classical “quest” myths (Jason and the golden fleece, the Odyssey, Siegfried). There are some great melodies, especially the famous march, but the vocal lines are not very memorable. The two leading female characters, the witch Fata Morgana (soprano Wendy Bryn Harmer) and her servant Smeraldina (mezzo Amanda Lynn Bottoms) were outstanding – clear, powerful voices with dead-on intonation. The jester Truffaldino (tenor Barry Banks) and magician Chelio (bass Brent Michael Smith) also acquitted themselves well, but the lead tenor role of the Prince was poorly sung by Jonathan Johnson – his voice was weak and barely projected into the first few rows of the orchestra. Probably inaudible in the upper reaches of the balcony.



The absurdity opens up wide possibilities for the director (Alessandro Talevi) and scenic designer (Justin Arienti), which they used imaginatively, although on occasion to slap-stick excess. The whole story is framed as a play-within-a-play, with the chorus playing the role of an on-stage audience, arguing about what genre they are seeing – tragedy! comedy! romance! farce! – and interfering with the action of the play to change the outcome. For example, after two princesses die of thirst in a

parched desert (see photo) – tragedy! – the “audience” saves the third one by providing her with water, enabling the ensuing developments – romance!

Here the staging was less than satisfactory. The “audience” was mostly dressed very casually in the equivalent of jeans and T-shirts, and ensconced on bare metal scaffolds at each side of the stage. It was a total contrast to the elaborate and fanciful costumes and sets of the drama they were watching.

In a previous production I saw in Chicago many years ago, the “audience” was seated in ornate gilded multi-level opera loges, and wore white tie/tails and evening gowns. Much more in keeping with the spirit of the piece, I thought. In this theater of Philly’s Academy of Music, the contrast was even more apparent, because there were actual gilded loges outside the proscenium as part of the auditorium design. The lower levels were used to seat elements of the orchestra; upper levels remained unused, but they added to the opulent décor of the hall.



## METROPOLITAN OPERA, NY

Puccini: *Turandot*



Gorgeous production, but uneven musically. The two sopranos were outstanding: Christine Goerke as the title princess, and Italian soprano Eleonora Buratto as Liu. Both voices crystal clear and powerful, with wonderful intonation and great emotion. Goerke is a noted Wagnerian soprano who won accolades for her Brunnhilde in Wagner's Ring Cycle at the Met last season, and is scheduled to repeat that role in the Ring at Lyric Opera of Chicago this season.

*Turandot's* title role is in a similar spinto dramatic vein. Too bad that the soprano parts are not more extensive – Liu has one major aria in Act I, is absent from Act II and reappears halfway through Act III. *Turandot* doesn't make a vocal entrance until the middle of Act II, but then is prominent in nearly every scene.

The male parts were a different story. The tenor lead singing Calaf, Azerbaijani Yusif Eyvazov, was clearly out of his league. His voice sounded thin and weak, and the signature aria in Act III, "Nessun dorma," was a particular disappointment. He just did not project that arching melody well, and the closing "Vincero!" was totally overpowered by the orchestral tutti. The minor parts, with the exception of Timur, Calaf's father, were also somewhat weak, below the quality one expects from the Met.

The music was typically, lushly Puccinian. There were snatches of far-eastern harmonies, but not as pervasive as in *Madama Butterfly*. The final chorus belts out a reprise of "Nessun dorma," in what is probably Alfano's completion of Puccini's unfinished work.

The production design was by Franco Zeffirelli from 1987, and it wears well. The first act is somewhat drab, representing the neighborhoods of the common people of Beijing, but the second act is more elaborate. It begins in the opulent apartments of the comedic trio of imperial ministers Ping, Pang and Pong, then that set lifts into the flies to reveal a truly grand royal palace (photo above). One minor cavil: the stage lighting in that scene was so bright that I had difficulty seeing the titles projected on the display in front of my seat, but the action is

somewhat self-explanatory, and I could follow the singing with my rudimentary Italian enough to make out the gist of the riddle scene.

The third act begins with a night-time scene in the palace gardens, wonderfully depicted with lush greenery and pagodas. At the end of the scene, a downstage scrim goes up, and it becomes apparent that the whole garden scene was an on-scrim projection. As the upstage lighting comes up, the scene of the royal palace reappears. Great stage mechanics!

So, in sum, mixed reactions. Some singing was great (especially the chorus, as always at the Met), some mediocre, but production values were first-rate.