

Four operas in three days at Santa Fe Opera:

Mozart: *The Impresario*
double bill with
Stravinsky: *Le Rossignol* (The Nightingale)

Ruo: Dr. Sun Yat-Sen

Donizetti: *Don Pasquale*.

IMPRESSARIO: It's a singspiel (like *Magic Flute*) with lots of spoken dialogue, here done in English. But not in translation - the dialogue and singing texts were totally rewritten, because the original had references to 18th C. Viennese inside jokes that have no current significance. It was staged in early 20th C. setting, and the production the impresario is planning in order to save his company from bankruptcy is Stravinsky's *Le Rossignol*!

LE ROSSIGNOL: Performed by the same cast as the above. Loosely based on a Hans Christian Andersen fairy tale, a short work in a modern but quite melodic style, telling the story of a Chinese emperor's fascination with the singing of the title bird, in juxtaposition with a mechanical copy (from Japan, no less). After he completed the first act, Stravinsky suspended the work to publish *Rite of Spring*. After that revolution in atonality, how could he complete the opera to be true both to its beginnings and to his new idiom? Turns out he did it quite well – the following two acts are much closer to the first act than to the revolution.

Despite the widely-used French title, the text is in Russian. The singing, especially by the women, was very good to spectacular. The cast included one of my favorite young sopranos, Erin Morley, whom we heard in 2012 as Queen Roxanna in Szymanowski's *King Roger* at Santa Fe (great voice but lousy Polish diction), and in 2013 as Sophie in Strauss's *Rosenkavalier* at the Metropolitan. Here she sang the role of one of the two auditioning sopranos in *Impresario*, then the title role in *Rossignol*. The latter involves some spectacular vocal pyrotechnics, which she pulled off, well, spectacularly. A powerful, very clean voice with no roughness or shrillness at full volume in the high notes. The other soprano auditioner, Brenda Rae, was equally good. In their competing auditions, they both flawlessly hit some amazing high notes. The male parts were less dazzling, written more for comedy than musicality, but quite satisfactory.

DR. SUN YAT-SEN: Written by Chinese-American composer Huang Ruo and having a world premiere in Hong Kong in 2011, this was the American premiere of the opera – the first Santa Fe did in Mandarin. Strangely, the vocal impression was very different from spoken Chinese – no staccato monosyllables, but a free-flowing language that, although totally unintelligible, was quite in harmony with the free-flowing music. And the music: flourishes of Stravinskian fanfares, with flashes of oriental percussion color, but also near Puccinean qualities in the sung duets and trios. Very enjoyable and pleasing to the ear.

The story is about the founder of the modern Chinese republic at the turn of the last century. But rather than the statesmanship of converting a corrupt empire into a modern republic, the main theme is a perennial one in opera – the abandonment of one woman for a younger one (based on actual events in Yat-Sen's life).

The singing was less spectacular than the previous night. The one stand-out was soprano Corinne Winters who sang the role of Yat-Sen's young second wife. The title role was supposed to be sung by the Chinese tenor who had commissioned the work and created the role, but he

withdrew and was substituted by a young singer from the apprentice program. Although competent, his singing was not thrilling.

DON PASQUALE: Yet another variation on the operatic theme of an older man lusting after a young wife – a la *Barber of Seville* – and often played out in real life up to the present time. This staging was done in contemporary dress, which made the story seem very relevant to the present – see Barbara Piasecka, or Anna Nicole Smith, or Donald Sterling (of the NBA LA Clippers).

The stand-out performer here was soprano Brenda Rae in the role of Norina – she from the double bill of two nights before, substituting for the originally scheduled singer. A powerful performance that did full justice to the bel canto vocal writing. The title role was ably done by baritone Andrew Shore, who performed in great voice and with great comic flair. The roles of the romantic tenor lead and Dr. Malatesta were very good, if not quite excellent. But on balance, a most satisfying experience.

Here is a write-up on the Santa Fe opera by the music critic of the Washington Post:
http://www.washingtonpost.com/entertainment/music/santa-fe-operas-sustained-high-note/2014/08/07/057da8f2-1ca3-11e4-ab7b-696c295ddfd1_story.html

(Make sure you pick up the entire link, from http to .html)