

Teatro Nuovo's Two *Tancredi*'s

Charles Jernigan, August 15, 2018

Where the hell is Purchase, New York?" asked a friend who lives in Manhattan. Actually, Purchase is about 31 miles north of Lincoln Center, near White Plains. It is the home of Purchase College of the State University of New York (SUNY), and to opera lovers it is the place where Peter Sellars staged his famous Mozart trilogy at the Pepsico Festival back in 1988. Today the stage at the Performing Arts Center is home to a new operatic venture imagined by Will Crutchfield, musicologist, conductor, teacher, critic and impresario. He calls it "Teatro Nuovo" and it takes up where his "Bel Canto at Caramoor" left off after a twenty year run as part of the program at the Caramoor estate in nearby Katonah, NY. For many years Crutchfield has run an apprentice artist program, the intent of which is to train young singers in the methodology of bel canto singing. True bel canto has always included the art of improvisation of ornaments, much in the way that jazz musicians improvise or riff on a tune, and that is an important part of Maestro Crutchfield's teaching. At Caramoor, the summer program always culminated in one or more bel canto musical works, performed as a concert in the open-air tent on the estate grounds.

Last year, Bel Canto at Caramoor and the larger music festival there amicably parted ways. Mr. Crutchfield wanted a more extensive program than he could run within the confines of the Caramoor summer music program, and he wanted a venue that would not be so susceptible to the vicissitudes of the weather. Thus the move to SUNY at Purchase. It remains to be seen whether the new venue will attract enough people from New York and environs to make a go of it as a festival presenting opera performances, but it does offer all the facilities needed for the apprentice program and a concert hall with good acoustics and air conditioning. This inaugural year Teatro Nuovo ("New Theater") offered performances of two and a half operas and assorted concerts and lectures scheduled around the festival theme, "The Dawn of Romantic Opera." The operas are Rossini's breakout serious work, *Tancredi* and Giovanni Simone Mayr's *Medea in Corinto*, both works which debuted in 1813; the festival included "two and a half operas" because *Tancredi* was performed in two versions--the original 1813 Venice version and a version with all of the alternative music which Rossini composed for subsequent productions inserted in place of the numbers he had originally written for Venice. The alternative music amounted to about 40% of "*Tancredi* Rifatto." Different casts performed each opera.

Tancredi, based on Voltaire's 1760 tragedy *Tanocrède*, tells a chivalric story of feuding families in medieval Syracuse. In Gaetano Rossi's original libretto, the still disguised Tancredi leads the Syracusans in battle against the forces of Solamir and wins. Dying, Solamir declares Amenaide's innocence, so that Tancredi returns victorious and to a happy ending with his beloved.

A few months after the Venetian premiere Rossini and his prima donna, Adelaide Malanotte went to Ferrara to mount the opera, and Rossini stayed at the villa of Count Luigi Lechi in nearby Brescia. Lechi and Malanotte were lovers, and the learned Lechi convinced Rossini to change the ending of his hit opera and follow Voltaire's tragic ending. Lechi himself wrote the new words: now Tancredi goes to battle Solamir, but he is mortally wounded. Carried in on a stretcher, he learns of Amenaide's innocence before expiring.

Tragic endings were hardly commonplace in opera in Italy in 1813, and the Ferrara version did not succeed with the public. For most subsequent performances the "lieto fine" was restored and Rossini left the manuscript of the tragic ending with Lechi, whose family preserved it until it came to light in 1970 when it was brought to the attention of conductor/musicologist Alberto Zedda, who offered it to American musicologist Phillip Gossett, who was then preparing the critical edition of the opera. Marilyn Horne first performed the tragic ending in Houston, and it has probably been the preferred ending ever since. The new ending included Tancredi's "Perchè turbar la calma" as well as the remarkably minimalist death scene, a "Cavatina Finale." Only "Perchè turbar la calma" became a regular part of subsequent performances after the Ferrara performances.

Rossini's own revisions to the score probably started even before Ferrara, in Venice, when he substituted Tancredi's entrance cavatina, "Di tanti palpiti" with the more ornate aria "Dolci d'amor parole," probably at the request of Malanotte, his Tancredi, who did not yet know that "Di tanti palpiti" would become the operatic hit of first half of the nineteenth century--well enough known to be quoted by Wagner in *Die Meistersinger* and probably the best known Italian operatic "tune" until Verdi composed "La donna è mobile" for *Rigoletto*. Nor did the changes stop with the Ferrara finale. Argirio's Act 2 aria as he contemplates signing his own daughter's death warrant, "Ah! segnar invano io tento" ("Ah, vainly I try to sign") was eliminated in Ferrara (probably because it had proven too difficult for the tenor), and may not even have been sung in Venice. Later that year, when *Tancredi* inaugurated the new Teatro Re in Milan, Rossini wrote two new arias for Argirio to replace the original ones in Acts 1 and 2: "Se ostinata ancor non cedi" ("If you obstinately do not yield") and "Al campo mi chiama" ("I am called to the battlefield"). Vocally they are simpler than the arias they replace, and the second one relies on interesting surrounding orchestral texture as well as a violin obbligato passage to surround the relatively limited vocal range of the sung text. Also in Milan, Roggiero (Tancredi's squire), a soprano pants role in Venice, became a tenor and got a new aria, "Torni d'amor la face" in place of the soprano aria di sorbetto "Torna alfin ridente e bella." Even Isaura got new music for her aria, "Tu che i miseri conforti," although the words remained the same. Because several of these "alternative arias" exist only in copyists' hands, it is uncertain whether all of them are actually by Rossini.

All of these alternatives were heard in the Sunday performance which Maestro Crutchfield called "*Tancredi* Rifatto" ("*Tancredi* Remade"). The Friday night performance on August 3 (and one the previous weekend) stuck to the original Venice score. It can be seen that Crutchfield's purpose in "Teatro Nuovo" is aimed at musical philology in the broadest sense--proper performance practice, variations introduced to the score, and (for the first time in America), the extension of historical performance norms to the orchestra. Perhaps this was the most interesting part of Crutchfield's experiment: to hear *Tancredi* and *Medea in Corinto* with the same kind of instruments that an opera goer would have heard in 1813, with the same kind of leaders and even with the same seating that was used in an opera orchestra in the early nineteenth century. Thus, the players used antique instruments--natural horns without valves, wooden flutes, instruments with gut strings and even a serpent in *Medea in Corinto*. The orchestra itself was raised to near stage level (but not on the stage) so that players could see and communicate with the singers; first violins faced the stage with their backs to the audience and second violins faced them. (In Rossini's day the second violins were often the students of the *maestri*--the first violins--so they would be looking at their teachers for cues and encouragement.) Most important of all, there was no conductor, a phenomenon which did not take hold in Italian opera houses until the middle of the nineteenth century. Instead, the orchestra leaders were the first violin (concertmaster) and the *maestro al cembalo*, the harpsichord,

or later forte-piano, player. Usually, the composer himself would be the *maestro al cembalo* at the first few performances of a new work. In the case of the Teatro Nuovo operas, Jakob Lehmann was primo violino; Will Crutchfield himself was *maestro al cembalo* for the *Tancredi* performances and Jonathan Brandani was *maestro al cembalo* for *Medea in Corinto*.

All of these changes in the band have long been made by groups wanting to perform baroque music in a historically authentic fashion, but it was a real innovation for a group performing nineteenth century music, at least in the U.S. It was a revelation to hear the music as it must have sounded to Rossini's ears. The sound is at once more "honest," less homogenized, less smooth than hearing the music played by a modern orchestra, even if there is more room for off notes from horns without valves. Also, by having the instrumentalists able to see the singers, there was more collaboration between singers and instrumentalists and a better environment to improvise ornaments and variations (vocal and instrumental), making the musical line more interesting. In a way, it was like the difference between a studio recording enhanced with all the tweaks and retakes possible in a modern sound studio and hearing a live performance when some things are different every night. Although both have their positive features, the live performance is undoubtedly more exciting; so too with the exciting sound of the period orchestra.

Crutchfield was also able to have his Teatro Nuovo Orchestra (about 50 players) present for the whole rehearsal period, an unheard of luxury which makes the singer/instrumentalist collaboration and the absence of a traditional conductor feasible. Voice categories may seem odd to a modern audience, but the hero Tancredi is a mezzo-soprano or a contralto, his squire is a soprano, and the heroine's father is a tenor instead of a bass or baritone. Guest artists for *Tancredi* (Venice version) included Tamara Mumford (Tancredi), Amanda Woodbury (Amenaide) and Santiago Ballerini (Argirio). Resident Artists (those who have come through the training programs of Bel Canto at Caramoor and Teatro Nuovo) included Hannah Ludwig (Isaura), Stephanie Sanchez (Roggiero) and Leo Radosavljevic (Orbazzano). All of the artists in *Tancredi* Rifatto were alumni of the training program, including Aleks Romano (Tancredi), Christine Lyons (Amenaide), Augusta Caso (Isaura), David Margulis (Argirio), James Harrington (Orbazzano), Junhan Choi (Roggiero) and Madison Marie McIntosh as the voice which echoes Tancredi in the opening alternative aria.

Mumford, who recently sang the lead in Saariaho's *L'amour de loin* at the Metropolitan, was elegant in slim black pants, white jacket and very high heels. Her beautiful, creamy mezzo was especially good in the lower register and she negotiated the demanding role with seeming ease. Amanda Woodbury, who has just sung Alaide in Bellini's *La straniera* with Washington Concert Opera was also very good as Amenaide, perhaps the most challenging part in the opera. She will be singing Leïla in *The Pearl Fishers* at the Met next season. Ballerini is a Crutchfield stalwart from Bel Canto at Caramoor, and his flexible tenor carried the day with that impossibly challenging second act aria. Aleks Romano, Tancredi in the alternate version, has made quite a career for herself lately in bel canto roles including the title role in Donizetti's *L'assedio di Calais* at Glimmerglass and Arsace (*Semiramide*) with Opera Delaware. She too was elegantly clad in a black pants suit. Her mezzo-soprano is one of the most exciting currently on offer--she has stunning flexibility and rich tone. Actually, not one of the other Resident Artists was unworthy, though perhaps I could single out Ms. Lyons and Ms. Caso as well as tenor Margulis for particular praise. The superb chorus (all male for *Tancredi*) was forceful and perfectly trained.

The operas were semi-staged, which means that there was a bare stage and everyone was dressed in formal attire, but only the chorus sang from scores. All of the principals moved around the stage

and acted their roles in a minimalist way. No one had their nose buried in a score. There was effective lighting (uncredited in the Program) which fit the mood of the action. In many ways it was more compelling than many a full production of this opera that I have seen, and in any case, it allowed one to concentrate on the music. And that music was very exciting in both versions. The "alive" and honest sound of the orchestra and the voices well trained to sing Rossini and able to invest his music with appropriate variations and ornaments, as he expected, made for highly pleasurable evening and afternoon performances (Aug. 3 and 5). Crutchfield's principal aims are to educate his musicians in the wonders of bel canto, but also to educate the audience in its possibilities and demands. If one attended the related lectures, demonstrations and concerts, one left the Teatro Nuovo weekend knowing a lot more about Rossini and bel canto. As pleasurable as the performances were, for an audience member attending the mini-festival, Teatro Nuovo was an intellectual treat as well as great entertainment.