

BEL CANTO FESTIVAL IN BAD WILDBAD: TANCREDI and ALTERNATIVE ARIAS CONCERT

By Charles Jernigan, July 30, 2019

Every year bel canto soars in the Black Forest of Germany, in the little spa town of Bad Wildbad, where Rossini came to take the waters long after he had stopped composing operas. Rossini in Wildbad has for several years widened its scope beyond the master from Pesaro and performs works by his contemporaries as well. For the opera lover in search of “new” works from the early nineteenth century, Wildbad is the place to come. This year’s offerings include *Tancredi*, *Corredino* (the original Rome edition of the opera that later came to be known as *Matilde di Shabran*), Meyerbeer’s first Italian opera, *Romilda e Costanza*, Mayr’s *L’accademia di musica*, Garcia’s *I tre gobbi*, and various concerts.

TANCREDI - FERRARA EDITION OF MARCH 21, 1813

Libretto by Gaetano Rossi; Final Scene by Luigi Lechi

Music by Gioachino Rossini

Conductor: Antonino Fogliani

Stage Director: Joachim Schönleber

Costumes: Martin Warth

Tancredi: Diana Haller

Amenaide: Elisa Balbo

Argirio: Patrick Kabongo

Orbazzano: Ugo Guagliardo

Isaura: Diletta Scandiuzzi

Roggiero: Claire Gascoin

Górecki Chamber Choir

Passionart Orchestra, Krakow

Tancredi, Rossini’s breakout hit from 1813 is the only really well known opera among this year’s Wildbad offerings. As all Rossini fans know, the story of the Syracusan knight and his love for Amenaide, daughter of Argirio, ruler of Syracuse, debuted in Venice, but soon moved to Ferrara, where Rossini replaced the happy ending with a tragic finale, more suitable to the plot and faithful to Voltaire’s play, the source of the opera. The composer made other changes for Ferrara, principally by suppressing Argirio’s Act II tenor aria and adding choral material which is needed for the tragic finale. There is even a third revision by the composer, made for Milan, with happy ending restored, and Rossini continued to tinker with the score for years, giving modern impresarios a choice of “authentic” editions and added arias for

modern performances. In our day the tragic finale (Ferrara score), which came to light in the 1970's and was edited by Phillip Gossett (and championed by Marilyn Horne), has taken precedent, although one occasionally sees the original Venice version or admixtures with various emendations.

The Wildbad production, however, adhered strictly to the score which musicologist have determined was heard in Ferrara, without any changes from other versions or additions, and it may have been the first time in the modern era when the Ferrara score was performed just as Rossini would have heard it in 1814. That meant cutting the great tenor aria from Act II, although Patrick Kabongo, the Argirio, could have sung it splendidly (many tenors will not attempt it because of its vocal hurdles).

The production, by Jochen Schönleber, shared with the new Royal Opera Festival of Krakow, Poland, was dark and simple, and, of course, updated as a contemporary fantasy (a production set in the time specified by the librettist is as rare in Germany as a snowstorm during the awful heat wave which coincided with the Wildbad performances). The bars of a prison stood at the rear of the stage in the tiny Königliches Kurtheater while the empty foreground had tables and chairs as needed. The male chorus was dressed in either black leather or trench coats with sunglasses, dated and cliched costuming to be sure. Schönleber's stage direction, however, was often effective: for once the lovers came across as the teenagers they were probably meant to be and their angry encounter in Act I, when Tancredi thinks that Amenaide has been unfaithful, was handled very well, coming perilously close to a physical fight. On the other hand, fussy stage action during Tancredi's famous entrance aria and cabaletta ("Di tanti palpiti"), fit neither the words nor the music. The final, tragic tableau, with Tancredi's death over Rossini's shockingly minimalist score, was superb, however. The tableau of Amenaide cradling the dying knight in her arms as Argirio knelt nearby and the light fade was a Michelangelesque Pietà.



Balbo as Amenaide



Haller, Balbo

Mezzo soprano Diana Haller was a wonderful Tancredi. She has a beautiful, full, rounded voice with great range and effortless coloratura, and she is a good actress. I am a veteran of many Tancredi death scenes, going back to The Great Horne herself, and Haller gave the best

one I have seen. The small, intimate theater helped, no doubt, but it was Haller's ability to sing with diminishing volume as she breathed her last, and still be clearly heard, which made the scene work so well. It was the first time I have ever seen the opera performed with the tragic ending when the final scene was not something of an anti-climax. Here it was exactly what it was meant to be—deeply moving. The audience held their applause for almost a minute afterwards before the cheers began. When the shockingly simple tragic ending failed with the 1814 Ferrara audience, which certainly expected something more rousing, Rossini scrapped it and returned to a happy wrap-up. He never tried something so radical, so modern, so avant-garde again, but this performance proved that his masterly touch was not a mistake—just 200 years ahead of its time.

Equally good was Patrick Kabongo as the aged father Argirio. The tenor, who started off in a church choir in Kinshasa (Congo), has sung often in Wildbad. His clear, incisive tenor, strong from top to bottom, with spot on high notes has all the agility needed for Rossini. Also good were Ugo Guagliardo, Diletta Scandiuzzi and Claire Gascoin. I have some reservations about Elisa Balbo as Amenaide. She has the requisite vocal agility and good stage presence, but her soprano is fairly thin and a little reedy for the role. The orchestra (with about 25 players) was well led by Antonino Fogliani and he managed fine balance in the small hall (about 125 seats), where it could easily have overwhelmed the singers.

Altogether an admirable performance, in parts truly great.

ARIE ALTERNATIVE

In the evening we attended an exciting performance of some 16 arias and scenas which Rossini composed as alternatives for his operas. The reasons for “arie alternative” are many—the request of a star singer, adjustments for the vocal capacities or individual talents of a singer or simply to find a more effective vocal solution for subsequent productions.

The arias, sometimes with chorus or interventions from other singers, were performed by several of the main Festival artists, with chorus and orchestra. They came from *L'inganno felice*, *La pietra del paragone*, *L'Italiana in Algeri*, *Matilde di Sharon*, *Sigismondo*, *Trovando e Dorliska*, *La gazza ladra*, *Armida*, *Eduardo e Cristina*, *Maometto II* and *Semiramide*. Many years ago Marilyn Horne issued a vinyl disc of Rossini Alternative Arias, and over the years some have been programmed in recitals and cds. However, I had not heard most of them before, and several were specially commissioned by the Deutsche Rossini Gesellschaft (German Rossini Society) as performing editions.

The Festival soloists included Silvia Dalla Benetta, Diana Haller, Victoria Yarovaya, Francisco Brito, César Cortés, Emmanuel Franco, David Oller, Ricardo Seguel and Shi Zong. José Miguel Pérez-Sierra led the Passionart Orchestra Krakow and the Górecki Chamber Choir. This is certainly a fascinating corner of Rossini studies. Every time you think you have him covered, musicologists turn up new works.