

Roses and swords: Cincinnati Opera's 'Romeo and Juliet' adds splendor to love/feud polarity



Balcony scene: "But soft, what light through yonder window breaks?"

Although Charles Gounod's "Romeo et Juliette" is no operatic obscurity, chances are many patrons of its production this weekend by [Cincinnati Opera](#) are familiar mostly with Shakespeare's romantic tragedy.

This company is up to its 23rd and 24th performances of the work (the first having been in 1922), which speaks to the durability of the French opera on its own. And the current co-production with Minnesota Opera gives many reasons to see "Romeo and Juliet" through the Gounod prism — with its characteristic sweetness, stageworthy majesty and forthright lyricism.

As seen Thursday night in the magnificently renovated Music Hall, "Romeo and Juliet" focuses on the symbolism of overwhelming love between "star-crossed lovers" challenged by an implacable feud between the Montagues and the Capulets. As everyone knows, miscommunication involving fatal and faux-fatal potions dooms the lovers, already challenged by Romeo's exile from Verona for having killed Juliet's cousin Tybalt.



Romeo (Matthew White) tries to separate Tybalt from Mercutio.

Gounod and his librettists make the death-eager hostility of Tybalt very nearly the fulcrum of the tragic action. So I will delay commenting on the principals. It's fortunate that Cincinnati Opera has an excellent Tybalt in Piotr Buszewski. It rests on this character to trumpet the Montague scion's intrusion on a Capulet party as a supreme insult and to stoke the interfamily bitterness more than either patriarch does.

The collective hostility is muted by the opera creators' elimination of Shakespeare's street brawl at the start. We get a sumptuously staged masked ball to launch the action, with the foreboding element of Tybalt's exposure of the party-

crashing Montagues. Strenuous and intensely focused, Buszewski's Tybalt drives the action right through to his swordfight with the effervescent Mercutio, whose death Romeo immediately avenges by stabbing the Capulet hothead. With his dying wish that Juliet marry the somewhat wooden wooer Paris, the operatic Tybalt complicates matters beyond the grave.

The expansiveness of Matthew Ozawa's stage direction works magic whether the performing space is full of people or restricted to the title characters. **It complements the wonders of William Boles' scenic design and the kaleidoscopic variety of Thomas C. Hase's lighting. Large, sculptural roses suspended above the stage change colors to suit the mood, from blood-red to ashen.** Rows of white swords are often superimposed on the backdrop to contrast with the outsized blooms.

Ending Act 3 in the original, the grandest of grand-opera finales allows the striking visual effects (swords and roses vying for supremacy) and the music to come together impressively. The doubly fatal swordfight issues in the Duke of Verona's appearance, together with what feels like the entire



Nicole Cabell displayed Juliet's sudden maturity.

Veronese citizenry, in a chorus confirming Romeo's banishment and lamenting the irreparable rift in civic life. Conductor Ramon Tebar's exuberant control of orchestra and chorus made this scene one that will likely be deposited in the memory banks of many, to be withdrawn whenever they feel the need to answer the question: Why do you go to the opera?

Now for the principals. Nicole Cabell captured aspects of her character that commentators on Shakespeare's play have noted: Juliet is more intelligent than Romeo and matures with stunning quickness. Cabell's soprano has a suitably worldly-wise sound. Juliet's passion doesn't remain girlish for long. In fact, Juliet's initial effusion — the waltz "Je veux vivre dans ce reve, qui m'enivre," one of the score's "greatest hits"— didn't sound as natural Thursday night as Cabell did in the later duets with Romeo. She really blossomed as completely as the production's rose imagery with the advancement of the plot toward its tragic conclusion.

Matthew White, a handsome tenor with the look and a few vocal hints of Wagner's Siegfried, was a Romeo who repeatedly excited the audience. (Special praise to him for stepping into the production on short notice.) His phrasing was fully sustained and the tone imbued with fervor. I found his performance of the great aria at the start of the balcony scene, "Ah! leve-toi soleil" moving but a little under strain technically. In terms of pure loveliness, a hallmark for tenors in French opera, he didn't have lots to offer. But his performance was vivid and always displayed thoroughly credible rapport with Cabell. This came through time and again, from the lovers' initial meeting at the masked ball, through the balcony scene (with the symbolic splendor of a large coffered picture frame around Juliet), the nuptials, the night of consummation, and on to the tomb scene.



Mercutio extols the power of dreams in the fairyland of Queen Mab.

In other roles, baritone Hadleigh Adams deserves kudos for his irrepressible bonhomie as Mercutio, fun-loving in his interplay with Romeo and aptly imaginative in the "Queen Mab" aria. With his comfy bass timbre, Kenneth Shaw projected the humane warmth and partisanship on the lovers' behalf that Friar Laurent needs to have. Catherine Keen had the matronly vigor and steadiness, even when teased by Capulet comrades, that Juliet's nurse requires to anchor the action somewhat in the real world. And in another one of the opera's few lighter moments, Reilly Nelson shone in the solo spotlight as Romeo's page, Stephano.

The second and final performance of "Romeo and Juliet" will be Saturday night. It's likely that something new in this time-worn story will be found by anyone who attends.

[Photos by Philip Groshong]