

OPERA REVIEW: Costanzo delivers searing portrayal of Nero in 'Poppea'



Anthony Roth Costanzo as Nero and Sarah Shafer as Poppea in Cincinnati Opera's production of "The Coronation of Poppea."

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By Janelle Gelfand –
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It's the ultimate irony that one of the most despicable characters in history is immortalized by some of the most beautiful music ever written.

Evil triumphs in Cincinnati Opera's "L'incoronazione di Poppea" ("The Coronation of Poppea"), [Claudio Monteverdi's](#) 1642 masterpiece about sex, power and political intrigue set in imperial Rome. The new production opened Thursday in Corbett Theater in the School for Creative and Performing Arts.

Countertenor [Anthony Roth Costanzo](#)'s portrayal of Nero, the tyrannical emperor of Rome, was searing. But in the final moment, director [Zack Winokur](#) further underscored Nero's detestable character with a shocking addition that caused a loud gasp to go up in the audience.

I won't reveal it here – and historically, the affected character was doomed. It was a bit of liberty taken to an opera that has had multiple editions and inconsistencies since its premiere. Debate still continues as to whether Monteverdi or someone else wrote the opera's most celebrated final duet for the lovers Nero and Poppea, "Pur ti miro."

On Thursday, the cast's realistic portrayals of the personalities in Nero's court and Winokur's cinematic staging allowed the action to flow with spellbinding effect over three acts. Judicious trims, including the prologue, reduced the work's original, Wagnerian length of more than four hours to slightly more than two.

Costanzo's Nero was both lustful and chilling, and the singer dominated the stage whenever he was present. He commanded a countertenor that soared into the stratosphere with remarkable power and flexibility, able to navigate vocal acrobatics with ease even while giving Poppea a kiss.

But the cruelty of the Roman emperor was always just beneath the surface of Costanzo's characterization. As Nero confronted his advisor, Seneca, about his plans to banish his wife Ottavia and make Poppea his empress, he clutched the older man's throat, singing with arresting intensity, "I'll rip out the tongue of anyone who censures me."

And in his drinking song with the poet Lucan (Andrew Owens) – in which the sensuous staging made it clear that Poppea wasn't the only object of his affections – he sealed the duet with a cruel stab to his companion.

Rather than a seductive siren, [Sarah Shafer](#) was a demure Poppea. Her light lyric soprano, though lovely, was somewhat overpowered in Act I love duets with Costanzo, and she didn't convince as the calculating would-be empress. But her final duet, "Pur ti miro" (I gaze at you), as she and Nero ascended stairs to her coronation, was one of the most sublime moments of the evening.

[Alex Rosen](#) brought dignity to the role of Seneca, who is forced by Nero to take his own life after Poppea plants seeds of doubt about the old philosopher. He communicated with a rich, focused bass in his final moments, surrounded by a

small chorus who pleaded “Don’t die, Seneca,” as Poppea watched from the shadows.

Countertenor Aryeh Nussbaum Cohen brought warmth and touching expression to the role of Ottone, who pines after his former lover, Poppea. Melissa Harvey was a charming, youthful Drusilla, who skipped and twirled to express her love for Ottone, and her sparkling voice matched her exuberance.

Adding to the intrigue, Ottavia, Nero’s rejected wife, tried to take revenge on her rival, Poppea, by blackmailing Ottone into killing her. [Sarah Mesko](#) met the role’s dramatic and vocal challenges wonderfully.

Smaller roles were also well-sung. One of the musical highlights was the lullaby sung by Arnalta ([Rebecca Ringle Kamarei](#)).

The cast wore period togas and robes, with red additions for Poppea and Nero (costumes by [Amanda McGee](#)). An attractive, minimalist set design by Adam Charlap Hyman, consisting of moveable arcades and a staircase, evoked the Roman court, **to which lighting designer Thomas C. Hase added magical effects.**

Nero raged against the exquisite backdrop of Monteverdi’s score. [Gary Thor Wedow](#) expertly led the pit orchestra, which included Annalisa Pappano’s superb period ensemble Catacoustic Consort – including theorbo, lute, Baroque triple harp and piping recorders -- and members of the Cincinnati Symphony Orchestra. Special note goes to Michael Unger, who enlivened the music on harpsichord and Baroque organ.

“The Coronation of Poppea” continues through July 1. Tickets: 513-241-2742, cincinnatiopera.org.