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Bellini, *I Puritani*: Seattle Opera, soloists, cond. Edoardo Müller, dir. Linda Brovsky, set designer Robert A. Dahlstrom, costume designer Peter J. Hall, lighting designer Thomas C. Hase, Marion Oliver McCaw Hall, Seattle, 17.5.2008 (BJ)



A spectacular weekend of music theater began for me with this stunning production of my favorite Bellini opera. Speight Jenkins waited until his 25th season as Seattle Opera's general director before finding a cast that could meet the vocal demands of *I Puritani*, and the result was clearly worth waiting for, taking its place among the perhaps half-dozen practically flawless evenings I have experienced in the opera house over the past fifty years.

It was not only the singing that thrilled, delighted, and satisfied. On a previous occasion I was mildly critical of Edoardo Müller's conducting, but this time his leadership was impeccable, and the orchestra played with superb elan and unfailing artistry. Jenkins's essay in the program observed that "One does not go to Bellini for orchestration or indeed for involved orchestral composition," which is certainly true of all the composer's ten earlier operas, but in *Puritani* a new awakening of instrumental imagination is evident. All the orchestral sections did full justice to the potential of their parts, Mark Robbins's sumptuous horn obbligato proving especially memorable in the great second-act duet for Giorgio and Riccardo, to which Geoffrey Bergler's rousing trumpet added visceral excitement. The well-focused work of Beth Kirchhoff's chorus was equally impressive.

As to Linda Brovsky's direction, what happened on stage during the overture was already a pleasure to observe. *Nothing* happened on stage, for Ms Brovsky was content to let the overture play before a black background, unlike those many contemporary directors who have to show us how much cleverer and more creative they are than mere composers and librettists, by arranging all sorts of more or less irrelevant stage business at the point where we should be allowed the luxury of pleasurably waiting for the curtain to rise.



Norah Amsellem (Elvira) Photo © 2008 Rozarii Lynch

And when Robert A. Dahlstrom's set was duly seen, what an impact it made! An intricate structure, darkly metallic in appearance, on three main levels, it was intersected by a variety of staircases, some wide and some narrow, some straight and some spiral. The effect was a triumph in two principal regards: vividly evoking the atmosphere of Piranesi's "imaginary prisons," the set unobtrusively made the point that Cromwell's Roundheads constituted a repressive and confined society; and while it swarmed with principals and with more than fifty chorus members, it enabled the audience to spot at once every character making an entry on one of the upper levels. Thus in each case we were led to wonder what the new entrant would do, in contrast to the many occasions when, on a single-level stage, we hear the voice of a new character and have to search around to find out where it is coming from. **Thomas C. Hase's subtle lighting reinforced the sense of severity, while yet allowing everything that mattered to be clearly seen,** and Peter J. Hall's costumes, originally designed back in 1976 for the Metropolitan Opera, rang colorful changes on 17th- and 19th-century fashions to match both the English Civil-War period and the music's romantic style.

Bellini being concerned above all with emotion and its expression through the human voice, all of these elements were ancillary to the main business of the evening—the performances of the four principals and their fellow singers. Thanks to their own talents and no doubt also to Linda Brovsky's firm directorial hand, I never found myself thinking about any of the performers' acting. There was none of the usual consciousness that one or other principal was more convincing than his colleagues: everyone simply was the person he was on stage to portray.

Nor, I am happy to report, was there a single weak link in terms of voice quality, technique, or stylistic command in the only one of the two casts that I had the opportunity to see and hear. In the role of Elvira's uncle Giorgio, John Relyea's majestic bass-baritone, formidable in sheer size and lustrous in timbre, was paired ideally with

the more incisive baritone of Mariusz Kwiecien as Riccardo. As Arturo, Lawrence Brownlee, a most impressive product of Seattle Opera's Young Artists program, delivered tenor singing of thrilling impact; he was lyrical and heroic in the same breath, fearless in tackling Bellini's often stratospheric tessitura, and notably accomplished in his Italian diction. But perhaps, aside from enthusiastic praise for Simeon Esper's Bruno Robertson, Joseph Rawley's Gualtiero Walton, and Fenlon Lamb's Enrichetta, the Elvira should be accorded the last word. Alike when she was being sane and when she was being deranged, French soprano Norah Amsellem sang with awe-inspiring virtuosity and touching truth of emotion. Her voice is as lovely as her looks, and she acts well too. As their contributions to this wonderful production brilliantly demonstrated, she and Brownlee are two young singers with already high achievements and golden futures.

Bernard Jacobson