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Stradella in the City

by Chris Petitt

Accessibility is a buzzword for many presenters of opera and early music, who view their mission as a struggle against a putatively dying art form. Leaving aside for the moment the fact that someone somewhere has been calling opera a dying art form for the last four hundred years of its existence, the perceived need to bring an “old” genre up to date has led to much directorial malfeasance in our times. Just as Teutonic directors of yore struggled with a recent fascist past by populating stages with Hitler clones, gender is the new bugaboo that challenges many a producer to come up with the Next Big Thing that will make audiences and critics alike shudder with recognition at the common ground between our own times and those of the past. The anachronistic plots and archaic gender roles that are opera’s stock-in-trade are the new frontier, and the advent of #MeToo provides new ground for male auteurs to grapple with their guilt.

Into our unprecedented climate of comeuppance enters the notorious bad-boy composer Alessandro Stradella (1639–82), a short-lived genius whose own romantic misbehavior caused his premature demise. This musical Caravaggio is enjoying a Renaissance of sorts both here and abroad, and we are all the richer for it, a bumper crop of performances and recordings bringing forth gorgeous rarities ripe for the picking.

New York audiences were treated to two very different Stradella productions this spring, *Ester liberatrice del popolo ebreo* and *Susanna*, the former presented in March by Salon/Sanctuary Concerts at Brotherhood Synagogue and the latter by Heartbeat Opera in collaboration with Opera Lafayette at the Brooklyn Academy of Music in May. The two productions were a study in contrasts in many aspects, not simply the range of what can be done with budgets big and small, but how one may use Stradella as a prism on the #MeToo revelations unfolding around us. Staged conventionally in a historic space, Salon/Sanctuary’s *Ester* offered a traditional approach. A cast of able singer-actors moved with economy around, on, and off the *bima* (central platform) of the charmingly austere mid-nineteenth-century structure. Scores in hand but no stage director involved, the performers kept the story moving along, with plenty of kneeling on the part of Jessica Gould’s stirringly dramatic Ester and Ian Pomerantz’s gleefully loathsome Aman.

And the evening really does belong to Aman, despite the title of the work, which we have to chalk up to Stradella’s enthusiasm for pushing buttons by making a revolting, genocidal creep the center of the piece. Aman aims to exterminate the Jewish population of Persia (and sings endlessly about it). It is up to Queen Ester, a secret Jew, to save her people and circumvent Aman’s arrogance in order to get the king (a resplendent Jonathan Woody) on her side.

Ester triumphs in the end, of course, even if she needs a little shove from her cousin Mardocheo (sung here by the velvet-voiced José Lemos) to nudge her into action. Ester’s intelligence and determination make her a heroine for our modern feminist age, joining her thematic sister Judith in a pantheon of Old Testament musical subjects whose baroque iterations enjoy increased visibility in our own time, their stories a validation of our own ideals.

The case for this piece was made and won by a cast of strong voices across the board, who enjoyed firm and nuanced support from a veteran basso continuo team, performing in a simple historical space that evoked both the historical era of the work's creation and the theological foundation of the story. The urgency of the need to fight genocide was clear, as was the virtue of doing so using intelligence rather than brawn.

The feminist voice of the piece needed no directorial assistance in order to be heard.

Susanna, the subject of our second Stradella outing, offered a very different scenario. A chaste wife subject to the voyeuristic intrusion of two village elders who spy her bathing, she is blackmailed and tried in a court on a trumped-up charge of immorality before she is rescued by the prophet Daniel and her harassers are punished (stripped down to their underwear, in this production).

Susanna got the #MeToo treatment in spades from director Ethan Heard, who left no stone unturned in demonstrating to modern audiences just how relevant the story is to our own times. Clever touches abounded, from the set (in which three statues indicating the spheres of the patriarchy—church, government, and war—are later toppled) to costuming (in which Susanna's nudity is indicated by a flesh-colored bodysuit flecked with aqueous sequins, the Elders wear gloves that glow a violent shade of red, and Susanna dons an orange prison suit while incarcerated).

This innovative spirit took a heavy-handed turn, however, as musical elements were subsumed into the directorial agenda. The role of Testo, the ubiquitous narrator in many an oratorio of this period, was re-fashioned into a professor, both spoken and sung by the magisterial contralto Sarah Couden. An introductory text in English was inserted for her, in order to play out the conceit that she is welcoming the audience to a lecture, while the Angel Daniel, sung by the bright voiced soprano Ariana Douglas, becomes her female assistant, literally accepting the baton from her mentor at the end as a metaphor for— well, I'm not exactly sure. Continuation of the matriarchy? Tenure?

At another point, the players departed entirely from Stradella's score to eke out some kind of screechy and nightmarish improvisation—one assumes to highlight Susanna's anguish in her prison scene. Being of the opinion that Stradella needs no help composing, I found this moment grating, and not in the way intended. Even the Italian translation had its moments of overkill, such as when the word *legge* (which means "law") was translated as "patriarchy." Really?

Happily, the directorial exuberance failed to distract from a uniformly strong cast, led by the achingly vulnerable performance of Spanish soprano Lucía Martín Cartón in the title role. Tenor Patrick Kilbride and bass Paul Max Tipton made a pair of vocally and dramatically well-matched Elders. Sarah Couden's commanding voice makes me want to hear her again when she has more interesting things to do.

We are fortunate to live in a time when Stradella is receiving such a level of attention that we can experience his works through a variety of approaches. Heartbeat Opera and Opera Lafayette used the composer as a springboard to explore the issue of modern-day justice. By leaving the drama alone, Salon/Sanctuary Concerts allowed the work to breathe, which ended up doing greater justice to Stradella. And to feminism.

Chris Petitt is a freelance writer and editor who divides his time between New York and Rome. He has written about baroque music for Seen and Heard International, Musicweb International, Thought Gallery, and Voce di Meche, among many other websites and publications, and maintains a blog called WritingRoma.