



 Italy Live Reviews

FESTIVAL FOCUS

International Rossini Festival

Review by Stephen Pritchard • Photography by Studio Amati Bacciardi

Teddy talk

Rossini probably never heard his epic opera *Semiramide* in the manner it was given at Pesaro this year. He was his own fiercest critic and cut whole arias even before its premiere in 1823, continuing to trim throughout its run that season. So why restore the whole thing to its full four-and-a-half-hour duration?

The Rossini Foundation argues that as the composer's last piece for the Italian stage, written for Venice before his move to London, it stands apart from his other works produced mainly for Naples, the city that had dominated Italian opera for 100 years. Most importantly, it deserves to be heard in all its splendour due to its pivotal role as a model opera for generations of Italian composers to come.

Whether an audience feels quite the same devotion to it as the clock ticks past 11:20pm is another matter. There were boos for the production team – there nearly always are for a new Pesaro staging – but those boorish detractors didn't seem to appreciate that director Graham Vick had allowed plenty of space for what they had chiefly come to hear: great singing.

Vick's gift is to always honour the music: giving the singers just enough to do without

wrecking their arias with absurdities, making the chorus a group of living, breathing individuals, and keeping the action moving with as little fuss as possible.

In the vast space of the Vitrifrigo Arena, Stuart Nunn's simple staging of moveable flats and Giuseppe Di Iorio's clean lighting design rightly left all the decoration and drama to conductor Michele Mariotti and the spectacular cast. Not that Vick had no tricks up his sleeve. Arsace, brilliantly sung by Armenian mezzo Varduhi Abrahamyan in high heels and décolletage, was definitely all woman, despite this being a trouser role – which added an extra frisson when *Semiramide* (the superb Salome Jicia) attempted seduction before discovering that Arsace is actually her long-lost, abducted son.

The theme of the lost boy ran throughout the piece, and not always successfully. At the opening we see the child and his blue teddy, only for the bear to reappear later in giant form towering over the stage, apparently preying on the conscience of the royal court but actually belittling the tragedy of maternal loss in a needlessly heavy-handed gesture.

After shaky starts, Argentinian bass Nahuel di Piero was an implacable Assur and Italian

tenor Antonino Siragusa a powerful Idreno, smashing his top Cs right to the back of the Vitrifrigo Arena. Stylish playing from the Orchestra Sinfonica Nazionale della RAI featured some particularly fine work from the woodwind and horns, and the hugely disciplined Coro del Teatro Ventiduo Basso sang with impressive precision and a startling range of vocal colour.

★★★★★

Identity crisis

The following night we were in the more intimate surroundings of the Teatro Rossini, in the historic heart of Pesaro, to witness the nascent Rossini trying his 18-year-old hand at *Demetrio e Polibio*. Later in life he liked to pretend he wrote it when he was 13 (backdating works was one of his weaknesses) but scholarship shows it came later.

While the orchestral writing is at times pedestrian, it's still a remarkable achievement for a teenager, with yards of vocal acrobatics and a plot that is wilfully complicated (the sort that would probably delight a formidably talented 18-year-old). Suffice to say that of the four principals, three have double identities and two are called Demetrio...

In 2010 director Davide Livermore bent this unpromising material into a production of real wit and charm, successfully revived this year by Alessandra Premoli. We are backstage at the Teatro Rossini, looking into the wings. As the overture begins, we witness the end of a performance and the clearing of the stage. Fire officers come and go (this theatre has burned several times and fire is a recurrent theme in this production) but eventually the lights are dimmed and the stagehands leave for the night.

Then, *Nutcracker*-like, the four principals emerge from prop boxes and begin. The three with double identities are joined by their alter-egos, actors who often represent what the principals are thinking rather than what they are actually singing. These ubiquitous doppelgangers become an integral part of the show, so it was a disappointment that they were neither credited in the programme nor allowed a curtain call of their own.

Italian bass Riccardo Fassi sang heroically as Polibio, a voice of great grit and character; Italian mezzo Cecilia Molinari was outstanding as Demetrio/Siveno; and Argentinian tenor Juan Francisco Gatell commanding and intense as Demetrio/Eumene, displaying nerves of steel as he was hoisted into the flies on a grand piano. Also borne away on that piano-bed was Lisinga, British-born Australian coloratura soprano Jessica Pratt, whose trademark floating pianissimo was too much in evidence throughout the evening. Only in her furious Act II aria did we hear real steel in her voice. When it came it was the highlight of the evening, rapturously received by an audience that clearly adores her, though it's not always obvious why.

Paolo Arrivabeni conducted the Filarmonica Gioachino Rossini and the disappointing Coro del Teatro della Fortuna M Agostini. They need more tenors.

★★★★

Stuck in the past

Back to the Arena for the second new production of the season, the comic opera *L'equivoco stravagante*. This is another from Rossini's teenage years but musically far more sophisticated than *Demetrio*. Going all-out for laughs were directors Moshe Leiser and Patrice Caurier, planting a rocket under the

off-the-shelf mix of comic father, pretty daughter, lovelorn hero, crafty servants and wealthy, unsuitable suitor.

But what the directors failed to do was challenge the 19th-century assumption that the daughter Ernestina, sung by the excellent Italian mezzo Teresa Iervolino, is a young woman with nothing but silly intellectual pretensions. She is the only member of the cast who aspires to learn and improve. Yes, she gets things wrong, but she knows her own mind and knows what she wants (when imprisoned, the first thing she misses are her books). It's a shame this production failed to re-evaluate this role. Dressing her up like a doll just underlined the dull misogyny inherent in the piece.

'Graham Vick's gift is to always honour the music'

Great fun was had by the all-Italian team of Pesaro stalwart Paolo Bordogna as the ambitious father Gamberotto, Davide Luciano as the wealthy but dim fiancé Buralicchio, Manuel Amati as the brilliant servant Frontino and Claudia Muschio as his fellow-plotter, Rosalia. All particularly impressed when singing in ensemble, often at furious, hilarious tempi. Pavel Kolgatin, as the lovelorn hero Ermanno, seemed to have vocal problems from the start, so it would be unfair to judge his performance from this one first-night hearing.

Everything fizzed along under the assured direction of Carlo Rizzi (conducting without a score), with suitably crisp, energetic playing from the RAI orchestra. And once again, the Ventidio Basso chorus made an invaluable contribution, this time decked out in surely the craziest comic-opera moustaches ever to grace the stage.

★★★★

Opposite page: Nightmarish vision: a giant blue teddy bear towers over proceedings in Graham Vick's production of *Semiramide*

Above right: Juan Francisco Gatell commands the stage in *Demetrio e Polibio* while Jessica Pratt ascends to the rafters on a grand piano

Right: Intellectual pretensions? Teresa Iervolino as Ernestina and Paolo Bordogna as Gamberotto in *L'equivoco stravagante*

