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Throwing peas to hungry lions

Opera as such has been in the news lately simply because it seems to be the misunderstood genre that gets short shrift from those detractors who imagine people like me would like to have a replica of the pre-1942 Royal Opera House.



Andriana Yordanova was all round passion as the gypsy Zemfira. Photo: Darrin Zammit Lupi

Nothing could be further from the truth. For those who are under the very mistaken impression that the government subsidises a plethora of operas all the year round for a very particular elite of aficionados; that run at huge losses, again, nothing could be further from the truth.

The Manoel Theatre BoV opera festival this year consists of two one act operas: Rossini's *La Cambiale di Matrimonio* and Rachmaninov's *Aleko* and on another night there's Handel's *Alcina*. That is about it for this year and if it were not for the two Gozo Band Clubs, *Astra* and *Aurora*, who against all odds, produce another opera each every year; that is that!

Yes, despite the quixotic protestations that the Barry Opera should be rebuilt as was, actual interest in opera has waned considerably. This is very sad when around the world it is growing in popularity and contemporary composers like Louis Andreissen, Philip Glass and John Adams have become dab hands at the genre.

The popular local perception is that opera is a glam affair, an anachronistic genre put up at great expense for the elite; cultural caprices that incur colossal losses. One is practically made to feel Ancien Regime if not *démodé*. I am unfazed. It's just a difficult phase in Malta's cultural and artistic development that is not helped by people at the helm who not only do not understand a sausage about culture and fine art but also refuse to take the advice of people who do.

That I am afraid is scandalously unforgivable.

After many hit and miss years, the BoV opera festival has this year achieved utter perfection; at least in as far as the home grown productions are concerned.

The Rachmaninov and the Rossini, strange bedfellows I would have thought but a coupling that, against all odds, worked, were effectively staged, pleasing to the eye, superbly sung, well acted and supported by a very polished orchestra and choir. What else could one want?

Despite the fact that on Bondi Plus, the chairman of the theatre declared bookings were only at 60 per cent, the theatre last Wednesday seemed pretty full while I was informed the dress rehearsal on Monday was packed to the rafters.

I had received an e-mail from the theatre informing me that, responding to demand from students to see the double billed Aleko and Cambiale, it was compelled (sic) to open up the dress rehearsal. I was delighted. Seats in the platea cost €60 and this relatively high price may possibly be why the actual performances were not fully patronised.

However, I am overjoyed the demand was there for I know, sure as eggs are eggs, that no matter how much they try to pooh-pooh opera, it is a genre that will, in one form or another, survive for as long as the arts will still mean anything to anyone. There is something very unique in the sound of a Russian baritone, a timbre as particular as the male choirs in the Russian Orthodox Church; deep, sonorous and soulful but at the same time powerfully virile.

I had first heard the wonderful Cavatina from Rachmaninov's Aleko, sung by the wildly attractive and velvety voiced Dmitri Hvorostovsky, proving that it is not only E LucevanLeStelle that is capable of tugging the heartstrings but opera in other languages than Italian. As long as those ever so useful subtitles tell us what is being sung, operas in German, French, Spanish or Russian will be a viable proposition.

Albert Schagidullin, who played the title role of Aleko last Wednesday, had a bit of a weak start probably due to stage direction placing him too far upstage. However, after a few bars, the cavatina, with Brian Schembri's baton keeping a tight rein on the almost barcarolle-like accompaniment, came together splendidly and the magic happened; I was close to tears.

It was so moving. The Aleko story is nothing new, even in opera. It's like Carmen, Pagliacci and Tabarro, where the jealous lover or husband ends up killing the unfaithful woman and possibly the lover too like in Cavalleria Rusticana. Victorian mores were, in the days when stories like Aleko were dreamt up by Pushkin, still strong and illicit love, no matter how romanticised, was always doomed to come to a sticky end; hence the deaths of Carmen, Nedda and, in this case, Zemfira; all unfaithful in their own way to older husbands or tiresome lovers.

This sort of verismo played to the bourgeois and rather straitlaced audiences of the late 19th century was sure to cause a frisson as the risqué story was something that happened to gypsies and mountebanks and not in the salons of the well to do, unless, of course, one remembers Anna Karenina but then we would be deviating a little too wildly from the object of this review.

Adriana Yordanova was all round passion blessed with a deeply expressive voice that had me riveted, while Noel Galea's simply melting and unmistakably aristocratic bass voice as the Old Gypsy, Zemfira's father, was unforgettable.

Rossini's LaCambiale di Matrimonio could not have been more of a contrast to the relatively lugubrious Aleko story. Putting them together actually worked, however, I am not sure if this coupling will ever gel

to become a Cav and Pag or a Trittico. I felt that although I hugely enjoyed the Rossini, which was played first, it was obfuscated by the much weightier and passionate Rachmaninov.

What I enjoyed was the practically all-Maltese cast of Cambiale putting up such a fine, tight-knit and above all balanced performance. Albert Buttigieg, Miriam Cauchi, Enrico Marabelli, Charles Vincenti, Claire Massa and Anthony Montebello pulled off this charming little farce with great style and some absolutely stunning singing.

Nothing remarkable in the Rossini score, the usual agitated rushes and effervescent climaxes, however kept under strict control by Brian Schembri who managed to eke a flawlessly tuneful horn solo in the overture, which set the tone for the entire opera.

This was staged like a late 19th century version of commedia dell'arte with a set with deceptively simple and effective revolving panels on either side that gave us three different rooms in Sir Tobias Mill's house. The orchestral, dramatic and visual story could not have contrasted more starkly with the Rachmaninov, where three telegraph poles crossed the stage diagonally giving the incredible impression, on the Manoel's tiny stage, of some godforsaken place on the immense and desolate Russian steppes.

The dense score where there was little or no evidence of the unmistakable Rachmaninovian timbre that would come later on with the epoch-making 2nd Piano Concerto, was all the same melodramatically Russian and full of orchestral colourations that relate directly to Rimsky-Korsakov, who was one of the greatest orchestrators of all time.

The Malta Philharmonic was impeccable. The direction was inspired. With his Russian background Schembri strode both worlds and understood them. He ensured the brooding menace of the score, the molten passion in the unmistakable Russian idiom, was played out to the full, proving that, yes, Malta is in fact ready to emerge out of its operatic chrysalis and give Puccini and Verdi a well-deserved rest.

Last year's inclusion of a beautiful but totally depressing Vaughan William's *Rider to the Sea* coupled with a lacklustre and muddled *Magic Flute* was not at all satisfactory. But this year I was delighted to put my misgivings about the future of this festival to bed and wallow in the sheer aesthetic delight of Angelika Franzels's slick stage direction, not to mention Hanna Eckart's delightful costumes for *Cambiale* and ingenious set design for *Aleko*.

The use of subtitles was fantastic. Nobody can follow a libretto in total darkness and even if one knows an opera well, subtitles are a good prompt to one's memory. These allow one to concentrate more on the rest of the Art (with a capital A), which is what makes up this wonderful genre we call opera, about which there is so much to learn and so little time if one is restricted to just one mini festival a year; it is just like throwing a pea to a hungry lion.