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BoV Opera Festival La cambiale di matrimonio/Aleko ManoelTheatre

One-of-a-kind operatic double bill

Of course this year's festival did not begin with opera's most famous twins. While those two are the product of high Italian verismo, Rossini's comic and breezy *La cambiale di matrimonio* offset by Rachmaninov's tragic and dramatic *Aleko* provided a marvellous contrast. Brian Schembri, conducting a goodly complement from the Malta Philharmonic Orchestra made a wise choice. *Aleko* had been in Maestro Schembri's mind for over 20 years and he finally brought it to Malta. I believe that not only was this a Malta premiere but also the first time a Russian opera was sung in its original language.



Enrico Marabelli as Sloolik, Claire Massa as Clarina, Miriam Cauchi as Fanny and Albert Buttigieg as Tobias Mill in La cambiale di matrimonio.

There were many other innovations this year, such as the use of surtitles in English as well as providing a printed libretto in both original languages and English together with the programme. With regard to *Aleko*, it was also the first time that all members of the cast from principal singers to chorus were at one point all involved in an exciting sequence of movement and dance ably choreographed by Tanya Bayona.

The staging was simple and very effective and Angelika Frenzel's artistic direction and the well-rehearsed participants ensured a slick, smooth performance of the two one-acters. It was also wise to go about the double-bill in chronological order so one could experience the difference in the two scores. Both required very judicious handling and Mro Schembri's meticulous approach always at the service of the music ensured that this moved on at the required pace. There was never a dull moment, for indeed the comic nature of Lacambiale was well projected thanks to a sparkingly energetic musical flow.

The singers acquitted themselves very well; baritone Enrico Marabelli excelling as Slook. It took me some time to get used to his being rather anachronistically attired as a gunslinger from the 1850s-80s while the others were more firmly set many decades earlier but his performance was so good that all else was forgotten. The pompous Tobias Mills was well portrayed by Albert Buttigieg, his scheming selling off of his daughter Fanny (Miriam Cauchi) in marriage to Slook thwarted by her own self, her impoverished lover Milfort (Charles Vincenti) and abetted not only by Slook himself but also her maid Clarina (Claire Massa) and Mills's bookkeeper Norton (Anthony Montebello). All the singers were on good form be it in solos, duets, trios and those rapidly difficult patter sequences in ensemble. They almost all had their moments of glory, such as Slook's reflections upon his predicament; Mills's own monologues; the duets between the lovers and their trios with Slook; Fanny's aria *Come tacer*, Milfort's introductory serenade and Clarina's *Anch'ioson giovane*.

Aleko is a sound and visual world of a different type. Dark, gloomy, menacing yet beautiful as only Rachmaninov's beautiful music could illustrate and underline. This is an opera with several numbers for chorus, here coached by John Galea who except for a few patches where the alti did not sound all that smooth was done proud throughout.



As far as I know, apart from a Bulgarian adhesion to the male section, only Russian baritone Albert Schagidulin in the title role and Bulgarian soprano Andreana Fenech-Yordanova as Zemfira speak Russian.

Yet, while I claim absolutely no knowledge of Russian beyond maybe 10 words, the whole thing sounded most convincing. Therefore it is all the more credit to Olga Vassilleva who was Russian language coach.

The bleakness of the plot was offset by a long sequence of gypsy-inspired dancing the bulk of which was performed by Lynne Salomone Reynaud, later ably partnered by Jes Sciberras. Tragedy was never far below the surface with Zemfira casting longing eyes at her lover, the Young Gypsy (Joseph Aquilina), both defying the morbidly jealous Aleko until he kills them both when he catches them in flagrante. These three singers created a very good impression with Ms Fenech-Yordanova making a long overdue and merited debut at the Manoel with her beautiful, full and very well-controlled voice.

Mr Aquilina sounded as if he were ideally cast for a Russian tenor type of role, particularly in his ardent serenade. Bass Noel Galea sang beautifully and with authority mingled with pathos. I thought that Albert Schagidulin could have made a more seethingly jealous cuckold but the comparative coldness with which he dealt with the situation still made him menacing enough.

On the other hand his gorgeously sung Cavatina made one sympathise with him, augmented by the postlude which with its tremendously powerful and moving orchestral climax and soft conclusion must have made everybody tremble with excitement. It bowled me over! Alto Claire Ghigo portrayed the Old Gypsy Woman with very few lines to sing and that almost at the very end.