



Central City Opera review: getting a handle on Handel

Baroque opera exquisitely done at Central City Opera

By Wes Blomster
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CENTRAL CITY -- Ever wonder why many of today's seniors feel strangely unfulfilled -- haunted by the fear that they have missed something essential in their many years?

Small wonder! It's all because they never had a chance to see a Baroque opera -- to say nothing of a Baroque opera exquisitely done, which is the case with the production of Handel's 1711 "Rinaldo" that opened at the Central City Opera here on Saturday.

Baroque opera lost its appeal with the death of the castrati that brought vocal splendor to it in its 18th-century Golden Age.

And even as the early music movement gained ground, it was slow to face the challenge of opera.

It was only when Marilyn Horne put on trousers -- and armor -- to sing those sword-swinging generals in Vivaldi and Handel that the world realized what it had been missing.

But Baroque opera makes new demands on a company for which "Bohemes" and "Butterflies" have long been the source of success.

And -- happily -- in "Rinaldo" the CCO has met this challenge head on!

To start with, there's the fact that "Rinaldo" calls for three countertenors! Fifty years ago there were only two in the whole world, Alfred Deller and Russell Oberlin, and they were viewed with suspicion as surviving court eunuchs.

Even Peter Schickele, a.k.a. P.D.Q. Bach, put them down as "bargain-counter tenors."

And although countertenors now grow on tuning forks, the CCO has recruited two of the currently finest -- David Walker and Jason Abrams -- to sing the brothers Goffredo and Eustazio who are out to make the First Crusade (1096-1099) a blood-dripping success.

Both are all-male males who sing with ease and immense vocal beauty.

And a third gender-bender in the cast, apprentice Tai Oney who sings heavily bearded hermit-magician Mao, lists officially as a male mezzo.

With a voice of almost-baritone timbre, he's clearly headed for fame.

But these are only the trimmings!

The CCO made its first excursion into the Baroque in its then-74 years with its 2006 staging of Monteverdi's "Poppea."

It was a sensation, and one knew that "Rinaldo" would be equally good when the company engaged three "stars" of that show for Handel.

In addition to Walker and Abrams, mezzo Phyllis Pancella is back as the shining knight whose story this is.

Even the bad guys in the cast sing so marvelously and with such fervor that one can only rejoice and thump one's New Testament when they see the light and fall on their knees before the cross.

Baritone Joshua Hopkins, back from last summer's "Lucretia," makes evil-bent Argante a snarling fiend, and Kathleen Kim as his equally malevolent sorceress-mate (you can't have Baroque opera without a witch or two) almost steals the show.

Realizing that she has been betrayed by both sides (in Baroque opera you can't really trust anyone), Kim pours a lust for revenge into her big aria that makes it the highlight of the show.

It's amusing to think of venom-spewing Kim, already a presence on the international opera scene, as Mozart's bird-brained bird woman Papageno, a role she has sung at the Met.

But the person who really wields the sword that triumphs over story and score is youthful British Baroque expert Matthew Halls who in his American opera debut transforms the CCO pit band with its modern instrument into an ensemble that rivals any Baroque orchestra around in making this production authentic.

Among Halls' impressive credits is his role as keyboard artist in Dutchman Ton's complete recording of Bach's cantatas.

Not to be overlooked are the effectively simple sets of Caleb Wertenbaker and costumes by Sarah Jean Tosetti, all lighted with sophisticated sensitivity by David Martin Jacques.

Although this "Rinaldo" runs a full three hours, it never lags. Halls know how to handle the da capo arias that often make Baroque opera soporific. (It's all about ornamentation, as he explains in a program-book interview.)

With the triumph of three new productions Central City has reached a new high of excellence and excitement in its 2009 season.

As it was at its outset in 1932, the company is again a major player on the American opera scene and well on its way toward becoming the destination festival that it was in pre-Santa Fe days.

CCO announces

2010 season

It's classic to contemporary works at the Central City Opera in 2010.

Puccini's "Madama Butterfly" opens the season in the production that brought famed soprano Catherine Malfitano to the company as director. And Malfitano will be on hand for the revival of the 2005 staging that set all-time box-office records at the CCO.