

arts and entertainment

A spellbinding staging of "Rinaldo"

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Soprano Megan Hart, left, is a star in the making as Almirena, and mezzo-soprano Phyllis Pancella conveys a convincing masculinity in the title role of "Rinaldo." (Mark Kiryluk, Central City Opera)

Move over, Harry Potter.

Nearly three centuries before the budding wizard made his literary appearance, composer George Frideric Handel and librettist Giacomo Rossi brewed their own bewitching concoction of supernatural doings in the opera "Rinaldo."

Handel's once-forgotten operas have made a rousing comeback in the past couple of decades.

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It's easy to understand why, after seeing Central City Opera's magical staging of this 1710-11 work — one of his masterpieces in the form.

This offering is, quite simply, one of the company's best all-around productions of the past five years or more.

Make no mistake: Stylized baroque opera, with the da capo or repeated structure of its arias, and a sometimes gender-blind approach to casting, can take some getting used to. But anyone willing to give these works a chance is likely to be quickly won over.

Of course, it helps, in this case, that Handel was one of the greatest composers of all time, and his beautiful score for "Rinaldo" evocatively shapes the characters and propels the action.

Set in the Middle East during the First Crusade (1096-1099), this love story, spiced with sorcery, soothsaying and deception, focuses on Rinaldo, a Christian knight, and Almirena, daughter of Gen. Goffredo.

When the couple is imprisoned by the enchantress Armida, Goffredo and his brother, Eustazio, undertake a sea journey to find a hermit magician, who supplies them with two powerful wands to overcome her witchcraft.

Director Marc Astafan, a Central City regular, keeps the story focused and clear, and manages to suggest the story's surprisingly epic reach despite the restrictions of the company's compact stage.

He and scenic designer Caleb Wertenbaker wisely stick to simple scenery, relying on a few select set pieces and a moveable platform, with stairs on each side, that is reused in multiple configurations.

Even for the more theatrically complicated moments, the two successfully stick with uncomplicated means. In the sea scene, for example, they employ three translucent panels and strips of blue fabric, which are all manipulated offstage to convey the movement of the water.

Giving the production its needed jolt of color and pageantry are designer Sara Jean Tosetti's luxuriant costumes, which are nothing short of spectacular. She has given them theatrical flair and a period flavor, without being overly beholden to historical accuracy.

But regardless of what one thinks about the staging, this production is worth experiencing for the music alone.

Central City Opera has assembled a dazzling cast from top to bottom — all with a first-rate understanding of and feel for the ornamentation and other distinctive challenges of baroque opera.

Countertenor David Walker, a Handel specialist, is wonderful as Goffredo, and baritone Joshua Hopkins puts his mark on the role of Argante, offering a commanding, suitably virile take on the king's first-act aria.

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But it is the women who dominate this production, starting with mezzo-soprano Phyllis Pancella, who offers a compelling, nuanced portrayal of the title character, managing to invest him with a convincing air of masculinity.

This multidimensional singer was at her best in the climatic aria of Act 1, powerfully conveying Rinaldo's dual emotions, as he achingly pours out his despair over the loss of Almirena and then defiantly vows revenge.

Soprano Kathleen Kim, an exciting singer with a huge stage persona, revels in Armida's sorcery and seduction. A vocal powerhouse, she tosses off the extreme technical challenges of this role with dash and showmanship.

The big discovery, though, is Megan Hart, a lovely, still-emerging soprano who seems destined for a major career. She is completely at home onstage, embracing the role of Almirena with enthusiasm and purpose.

This young singer possesses a pleasing, lustrous voice with depth and power, and she knows how to use it to maximum effect, conveying the character's emotions and holding the audience in thrall.

Deserving special kudos is Matthew Halls, the production's superb conductor. He infuses this production with energy and deserves part of the credit for the high level of singing.

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"RINALDO."

Opera. Central City Opera House, 124 Eureka St. Central City Opera presents George Frideric Handel's fantastical 1710-11 opera — its first offering ever by the celebrated baroque composer. **2:30 p.m. Thursday, Saturday, July 22, 24, 26 and Aug 1. 3 hours. \$50-\$99 .** 303-292-6700 or centralcityopera.org

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