



by Sam Juliano

The music in Thomas Ades's opera *The Tempest* slowly creeps up on you like an increasingly windy night, when you realize before it's too late that you haven't dressed properly for the sudden change in weather. Its first act harmonic dissonances yield to soaring lyrical intensity late in the second act, and after a short prelude to Act III which showcases some of the composer's most beautiful and atmospheric music, the hectic dramatic machinations of the Bard's great play are informed by lustrous vocals by a cast of international renown.

In all fairness a listener is treated in the first act to some rhapsodic lyricism, even if the "musical language" here was purposefully discordant as a result of Prospero's wicked summoning of the storm aimed to ensnare his enemies and to deceive Ferdinand and his shipwrecked court, while Prospero's daughter Miranda is deeply saddened by her father's behavior. Ades makes a conscious artistic decision to suggest that the blossoming love of Miranda and Ferdinand surpasses even the power of Prospero. It is through these late passages when forgiveness, reconciliation and generosity dominate the drama, that Ades and his superb lyricist Meredith Oakes reach the heights of operatic voice interplay where world class tenor Simon Keelyside, soprano Kate Royal and tenor Toby Spence

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accomplish some powerful voice fusion that conveys the dramatic power of Shakespeare's stirring character interactions. It would be hard to conceive of anyone not being moved by tracks 10, 11 and 12 on disc 2 of the double-CD set, where the singing and orchestration collaborate to overwhelming effect. Ades understands where he had to let loose, and it may seem to many opera neophytes that he was in a "holding pattern" waiting for the drama to dictate when to land. The ravishing coda may simply be explained as saving the best for last, but it's the end result of a painstaking compositional plan where discord is conveyed by thorny and jolting music and tenderness and passion are expressed through almost Puccini-esque lyricism.

This game plan shows Ades's indebtedness to his fellow British composer Benjamin Britten whose harmonic style in his operas was noted for its innovations. From his orchestral work Britten took a broadened sense of melodic variation and harmony, 12-note elements and a heterophonic style of music based on the Indian raga and he was a master of poetic text painting, or the illustration of words in a libretto through music. Britten, the greatest English opera composer since Handel, influenced all who came after, including Ades, who basically takes a traditional approach to the material, even selecting sources that are famous, much like Britten did with *Billy Budd*, *Death and Venice* and *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, and in part utilizing supernatural elements.

Less traditional though is the libretto's reliance on Oakes's rhyming couplets which rather severely undercut *The Tempest*, both contextually and aesthetically. But it's practically inevitable to envision and accept such an alteration when you are moving from one form to another. Verdi himself had to make compromises, especially with his earlier *Macbeth* and with *Falstaff*, and Ambroise Thomas excised even more in his underrated opera of *Hamlet*. While the emotional kinship of many of its parts are undeniable, the point is that Ades must make some generalizations for the orchestra and the singers. the famed 'wrong-note' tonalities that plagued Britten amongst his harshest critics are present on this technically solid CD set, but they have now become part of a dominant style in vocal writing that is distinctly direct and minimalist. But Ades moves ahead unpredictably, and while he lamentably opts to have some singers deliver notes on the register's extreme end which seemingly mitigates against a workable melodic line with some passages, but the etherwordly sound of the music and the eerie silences do evoke the world suggested by the surreal elements of *The Tempest*, so largely the approach is successful. The opera's haunting score has been derided by some of the work's detractors as allowing 'almost every vocal utterance be shadowed in the orchestra with lines in rhythmic unison on various instruments.'" While Ariel's affecting passage at the end of scene 5 breaks from this pattern, the truth is it is a post-modernist musical style that has defined not only English opera, but American and world-wide composition.

While Keelyside always manages to inhabit every role he assumes, he makes the cryptic Prospero a character of sweeping ambiguity, and he powerfully stirs

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Flame and Citron **** 1/2 (sj)

the emotions with his booming oratory. The tenor-baritone Ian Bostridge has an imposing voice of doom, perfectly calibrated for the role of Caliban. Kate Royal and Tony Spence provide the work with it's most ravishing duet, the profession of love between Miranda and Ferdinand. Ariel's asexuality is transcribed in several lovely moments including the "Five fathoms deep, your father lies' passage and the great soprano Cyndia Sieden does brilliant work, among the best in the opera. And it's always a special treat to have the the great Phillip Langridge, a great Britten vocalizer, on board with his memorable short stint here as the King of Naples.

The Tempest certainly contends for the vaunted designation of 'Greatest English Opera Since Britten.' Ades is only 39 years old, and the test of time must certainly be employed here in assessing it's chances for holding the stage, but the recent resurrection last year at Covent Garden was a resounding success, and this present EMI recording of that live performance, conducted by Ades and with Vasko Vassilev guiding the chorus, is a musically colorful and sonically balanced treat that at the very least will serve notice to the music world that opera is still a viable form today.

The most spectacular news of all though is that the Metropolitan Opera have announced that *The Tempest* will be staged in New York City for a number of performances during the 2011-12 seasons. Mr. Ades could not possibly receive more glorifying validation of his newest work.

Note: 'Wonders in the Dark' extends a special thanks to David Carleton of 'Schwalbe and Partners for sending on the review copy set.

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DeeDee

on September 2, 2009 at 6:24 am | Reply

Hi! Sam Juliano,

Sam Juliano said, "Note: 'Wonders in the Dark' extends a special thanks to David Carleton of 'Schwalbe and Partners for sending on the review copy set."

Wow, that is a very nice "gesture" by David Carleton of 'Schwalbe and Partners."

Sam Juliano, your post about the **Tempest** CD is very interesting and very informative too...

Thanks, for sharing!

Food Inc. *** 1/2 (sj)

Harry Potter and the Half Blood Prince *** (sj)

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Humpday *1/2 (sj)

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Moon ** (sj)

Orphans *1/2 (sj)

Ponyo **** (sj)

Public Enemies *** (sj)

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Thirst ** 1/2 (sj)

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