

When the music is respected — but the opera's staged incorrectly

A co-production brings Monteverdi's *The Coronation of Poppea* to the Teatro Coliseo

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FOR THE HERALD

A new way of telling stories with music was born in Florence in 1597, when the Camerata Fiorentina went back to Greek mythology in a *Dafne* with music by Peri, now unfortunately lost, but in 1600 both Peri and Caccini wrote *Euridice*, and these are extant; they are mostly recitative and words dominate the music. But Claudio Monteverdi showed the right way in 1607 with his *La favola d'Orfeo* for the Court of Mantua (on the same subject but giving pride of place to Orfeo rather than Euridice). There were "notable advances both in dramatic characterisation and in musical form" (Willi Apel).

Monteverdi moved to Venice and it was there that in 1637 the first opera house was opened, the Teatro San Cassiano. Now what had been court entertainment was seen by the common people. The composer, equally adept in sacred and profane music, went in his life (1567-1643) from the Late Renaissance to the Early Baroque, or as he said, from the "prima prattica" to the "seconda prattica." Unfortunately, no less than 10 of his operas have been lost, and only two (apart from Orfeo and the admirable fragment of *Arianna*: the "Lamento") have survived, those written in his final years: *Il ritorno d'Ulisse in patria* (1641) and *L'incoronazione di Poppea* (1642). It's a good thing that all three have been staged in Buenos Aires.

There was no edition of *Poppea* but two manuscripts have come to us: the Venetian at the Biblioteca Marciana, and the Neapolitan, at the Conservatory San Pietro a Majella. They have considerable differences. *Poppea* is recognised as a great masterpiece. There were editions in the 20th Century by the likes of specialists such as D'Indy, Malipiero, Krenek and Redlich.

It was premièred in Buenos Aires at the Asociación Cultural de Conciertos, Grand Splendid, in 1927, and the Colón presented it in 1938 conducted by no less than Tullio Serafin. My first experience was in 1965, when Bruno Bartoletti presented an honourable performance with a certain degree of historicism, but the Colón touched greatness with the 1996 performances led by René Jacobs, staged by Gilbert Deflo, and sung by a distinguished cast. Then, the Buenos Aires Lírica (BAL) had the merit of giving a stylish staging by Rita de Letteriis and a very decent musical realisation at the Avenida in 2006.

There are admirable recordings led by Leppard, Harnoncourt, Jacobs, Gardiner and Hickox, and it's interesting to observe that both in them and in stagings in Buenos

Aires, some roles have been sung by different types of voice: Nero by tenor or mezzo, Arnalta by tenor or mezzo or contralto, Ottone by countertenor or mezzo or baritone. Granted, that sort of problem is typical of the Baroque, but more from later stages of that period when *castrati* reigned, nowadays they are replaced generally by countertenors (I don't suppose historicism will go as far as reviving the *castrati*...).

The opera is long (about three hours and a half) and most performances prune it here or there. The recent presentation was (for the first time) a joint enterprise of Nuova Harmonia (NH) and BAL, starting both seasons; the venue, the Coliseo. The initial night was that of the NH (the one I saw), the other two, for the BAL.

Both institutions innovated: NH because it is a concert concern, BAL because its usual home has been the Avenida. Probably costs were the reason for this association. The BAL will present only one opera at the Avenida (that overworked standard, *La Bohème*), and two chamber operas at the Picadero; their fifth title won't be an opera but a concert at the Avenida.

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SAFE HANDS

Poppea's ample cast combines six gods with 19 mortals; this version eliminates Pallade, Mercurio and Venere. The music is enormously varied: recitatives, ariosos, arias, instrumental pieces, duets, quartets, concertantes; laments, marches, brilliant and funny episodes, tragic ones (Seneca's death)... not all of it is Monteverdi's; e.g., the beautiful final duet of Nerone and Poppea was written by Benedetto Ferrari, otherwise almost unknown nowadays (his operas are lost). And although the instrumental music is all written out, there's no specified orchestration. Of course, this means that they may change from one historicist interpretation to another, but with Marcelo Bitman we were in safe hands; he has shown his worth in



L'incoronazione di Poppea, a co-production by Nuova Harmonia and the Buenos Aires Lírica.

admirable premières and revivals of Baroque French operas with his Orchestra Compañía de las Luces ("Company of Lights"); Monteverdi proves to be up the conductor's aisle. He used for the orchestra five violins, two violas, two cellos, bass, flutes, a cornetto (a wooden trumpet), trumpet, three sackbuts (predecessors of trombones) and percussion. And for the *continuo* (in solo numbers), two harpsichords, two lutes and guitars, two theorbos, two harps, two viola da gambas and cello. The playing was excellent and the conducting, always flexible and expressive.

Some words about Gian Francesco Busenello's libretto, based on Tacitus' *Annals* and Suetonius' *Life of the Caesars*. It is unabashedly licentious and cynical. Here the bad ones win: Nero rejects and exiles his wife Ottavia, Poppea wins power through lust, the Stoic philosopher Seneca commits suicide on Nero's orders (who didn't tolerate his mentor's sage counsels). And Ottone, clad as Drusilla, fails ridiculously to kill Poppea (whom he loves), instigated by Ottavia (the weakest moment of the libretto, otherwise interesting and well written).

DOMINANT

Two singers dominated: the Venezuelan bass Iván García (now a resident here) was a powerful and noble Seneca; and the Brazilian mezzo Luisa Francesconi (début, I believe) has important vocal material and gave her grieving-but-vengeful Ottavia much dramatic presence. I have enjoyed Cecilia Pastawski in Mozartian roles, but she lacks the

arrogant sexiness Poppea requires and also some volume. Tenor Santiago Bürgi was a Nero alternately amorous and violent with less line than the Baroque requires, but he was a convincing actor.

As in 2006, countertenor Martín Oro was Ottone, though this time I found him too mannered in phrasing and rather weak dramatically. Gloria Rojas, a Chilean contralto, sang Arnalta's (Poppea's wet-nurse) lullaby expressively, but her later intervention was so absurdly marked by the stage director that I was sorry for her. I think the same about soprano Victoria Gaeta: as Drusilla she was fresh and musical, but in the prologue her Fortuna was so over-the-top that I cringed. The *Amore* of Adriano D'Alchimio was well sung but terribly kitsch, whilst Rocío Arbizu did well as Virtue and Damigella (Maiden). The others were good: Josué Miranda, Agustín Gómez, Mariano Fernández Bustinza and

Juan Pablo Labourdette. The seven dancers were accurate in the cabaret-ish choreography of Ignacio González Cano.

As you may have inferred, I wasn't happy with Marcelo Lombardero's staging and kept thinking, De Letteriis come back! The prologue (a dialogue between Fortuna, Virtú and Amore) was the wickedest sort of low kitsch. The three acts were compressed into two; that doesn't bother me. But the recurring near-soft-porn, the lack of subtlety, the uncalled-for grotesque (clown's noses in the final scene), the incongruities, are so dominant that the few dignified moments hardly compensate (Seneca's death, Arnalta's lullaby). True, Daniel Feijóo's stage design does have some quality, but the costume designs of Luciana Gutman are mostly ugly and absurd, and the lighting by Horacio Efron sometimes was unhelpful to understand the action.

Tucumán jazz festival

From May 10 to 14 the northwestern province of Tucumán will be staging its first international jazz festival in four cities of that province, featuring the Vincent Herring (sax) sextet from the United States, the André Marques (guitar) sextet from Brazil, Rubén Rada's Confidence group from Uruguay and three famous Israeli performers Maya Belsitzman, Matan Ephrat and Yotam Silberstein among other international artists. There will be a total of 20 concerts together with jazz clinics and chats.