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Elena Mosuc & Antonino Siragusa Put On Strong Performances In Static Production

By [Alan Neilson](#)

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Photo: Fabio Parenzan Visualart, Teatro Verdi Trieste

Possibly one of the most difficult tasks given to a director is that of producing an opera by Bellini.

His works contain some of the most sensuously beguiling music written for the stage, his long arching melodies are entrancing and emotionally captivating.

There is no doubt that the opportunities for singers to display the beauty and dexterity of their voices are many, but the dramas have not managed to carve out a place in the repertoire to the same extent as works by other composers such as Verdi, Rossini or even Donizetti.

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The reason for this has to be the static nature of the narratives. They are almost all slow-moving affairs, with very simple plots, kept alive by Bellini's glorious music. Singers, singularly or in ensembles, are the centerpiece, to such an extent that the drama can easily fade into the background. So often, audiences are presented with a static staging, maybe with beautiful scenery and sumptuously designed costumes, possibly nicely choreographed, but nearly always without much movement. The mise-en-scene is so often the main contribution made by the production team; rarely if ever, does the staging achieve parity with the music.

Nevertheless, Teatro Verdi, Trieste took the bold decision to open its 2018-19 season with a presentation of Bellini's, "I Puritani," his final work before his all too premature death at the age of 34, a work which hints at the future musical direction his works may have taken had he lived longer.

Still Static

For this production, the direction was placed in the hands of Davide Garatini Raimondi and the famous soprano, Katia Ricciarelli, who performed the role to such great acclaim on a number of occasions. Nevertheless, even with her deep understanding of the opera, its presentation still fell short, failing to inject much into the drama beyond the visually pleasing, and the individual characterization of its protagonists. The mise-en-scene was colorful and very appealing, and all the movements were well-coordinated, but ultimately, as is so often the case with Bellini operas, there was little real action taking place.



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Ricciarelli and Raimondi opted for a traditional reading, set in 1640s England, and was effectively brought to the stage by the scenographer, Paolo Vitale, in a single design. The set comprised the inside of a castle under construction or repair, with scaffolding on its walls, with a slightly raked platform in front, which allowed the chorus to position itself on a number of levels, as well across the stage.

The back wall, beyond the castle, was used for the projected images of the changing weather and times of the day. The movements of the sun, moon and clouds across the sky added a variety of colours to the scenes. Overall, it was a functional and aesthetically pleasing set, capturing the closed atmosphere of the drama.

Costumes, designed by Giada Masi, were also in keeping with the traditional setting. The chorus and the Puritan protagonists were dressed in simple, mainly black, costumes with white collars, although the women appeared to be more Spanish than English in their dress. Arturo, a Royalist, was distinguished by his more colorful apparel, as was Queen Enrichetta. Elvira, also was given a distinctive costume, but less ornate than those of the Royalists. The only negative criticism being that for the more intimate scenes, a dull unimagined cloth was used to separate the front of the stage from the scenery.

Fortunes Abound Vocally

Musically, "I Puritani" is very a demanding opera requiring a tenor with a high tessitura and an ability to extend the voice beyond its normal outer limit, as well as an excellent lyric soprano. For this production, the Teatro Verdi, Trieste was fortunate to have two singers, who were able to produce convincing, if not necessarily outstanding, performances.

In the role of Elvira, the object of Arturo and Riccardo's affection, was Elena Mosuc. Technically secure and wonderfully agile, Mosuc displayed precision and impressive vocal control in mastering the role's demands. Her voice has beauty across the range; her upper register, in particular, glowed with a crystalline clarity, which enabled her to indulge in some sparkling coloratura displays. She rode the

score's vocal contours with grace and apparent ease, without any sign of vocal stress or tiring, popping out the top notes until the final curtain. Yet, there was a question mark as to the extent she was able to vary her approach to match the subtlety of Elvira's changing emotions. It was, nevertheless, a strong portrayal.

The role of Arturo was played by Antonino Siragusa. He possesses a strong, distinctive sounding tenor. It is a voice that is likely to divide opinion about its suitability for the role, for Siragusa's voice is relatively monochromatic. If you enjoy its timbre, then his confident, expansive delivery, will undoubtedly impress. Of course, if it is not to your taste, or you prefer a voice with a greater variety coloring, then it is possible he may fall short.

His was a suitably earnest portrayal of Elvira's lover, acting out the part convincingly and singing with ardent desire, happy to push his voice forcefully into his upper register in order to press his claim. He sang with a great deal of freedom, displaying good articulation, technically accomplished phrasing and dynamic subtlety. He possesses the necessary upper extension to cope with the daunting "Credeasi, misera," maintaining the voice's attractive and firm quality. In what is undoubtedly a demanding role, Siragusa emerged with credit. The only blemishes was the occasional rude note, and some awkward transitioning into the upper register. Overall, however, this was a fine, free-singing performance, although not one with a great deal of emphasis placed on the subtleties of characterization.

Strong Impact

Mario Cassi was parted in the role of Riccardo, and produced a flawless acting performance. With just the right amount of gravitas, and in typical Puritan fashion, he never allowed his emotions to become too extreme, preferring to err on the side of understatement.

Nor was his singing any less effective, his warm attractive baritone clothing the vocal line with a rich array of colors to subtly depict his emotional state. Cassi's voice is strong, well-balanced and sings with a high degree of confidence. The duet, "Suoni la tromba," sung alongside Birkus' Sir Giorgio was one of the musical highlights of the performance, with both singers producing strong, fully committed and convincing portrayals, their voices blending beautifully. If there was one criticism to make of Cassi's singing, it was that embellishments tended towards

the mechanical. However, his performance can still be considered to have been a successful portrait of Riccardo.

Bass Alexey Birkus essayed the role of Elvira's uncle Sir Giorgio to good effect. He possesses a well-supported voice, rooted deeply and blooming with a rich timbre. His aria, "Cinta di fiori e col bel crin disciolto," was beautifully delivered, displaying his accomplished phrasing and subtle accenting. That said, in the duet "O amato zio, o mio secondo padre," he was a little underpowered.

The Japanese mezzo-soprano, Notzomi Kato, gave an excellent performance in the role of Queen Enrichetta. She delivered her lines with a regal air, singing with an authoritative demeanor. Her phrasing was precise, the voice firm and well-grounded, her ability to alter the coloring impressive. It may have only been a small role, but she made a big impact.

Elvira's father Gualtiero was portrayed by the bass Giuliano Pelizon. He put in a convincing performance, his voice displaying a pleasing timbre, and articulated his lines well.

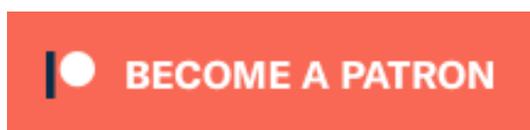
The chorus of the Teatro Verdi, Trieste, managed by the maestro del Coro, Francesca Tosi, sang well, but was unsatisfactorily choreographed and magnified the static nature of their role. They did, however, add color and presence to the mise-en-scene, which were nicely constructed.

The Orchestra della Fondazione Teatro Lirico Giuseppe Verdi di Trieste under the direction of Fabrizio Maria Carminati gave a solid, if somewhat, constrained reading of the work. The characteristic long arching melodies failed to take wing, compromised by the vigilant support he provided to the singers. On the other hand, Carminati kept up good pace and was attentive to the score's dramatic junctures. Carminati also decided to include two specific musical moments, contained in the score of "I Puritani" held by Biblioteca Cherubini di Firenze: a duet, "Da quel di ch'io ti mirai" and a further smaller duet from the finale, both for Elvira and Arturo in Act three.

Overall, this was an enjoyable performance, and if it couldn't solve the problem of the work's lack of dramatic movement, it nevertheless produced an appealing spectacle.

On the musical side, all the singers gave pleasing displays, which lay nicely on the ear due, in no small measure, to the splendid support given to them by Carminati. If the production failed to hit the dramatic and musical heights, it says a lot about the difficulties in bringing the work to the stage, for this was an accomplished cast, with a good orchestra, and directors who certainly possess a deep knowledge of the work.

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