

LYRIC OPERA

KANSAS CITY

THE CAPULETS & THE MONTAGUES

Vincenzo Bellini 1830

September 21, 25, 27, 29, 2013

Romeo and Juliet revisited

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Kevin Newbury made some bold decisions about how to deliver Bellini's version of the Romeo and Juliet saga (a musical setting of Felice Romani's libretto) to a twenty-first-century audience. The Lyric Opera's version separated the political and romantic narrative from its regional and historic origins, with help from Vita Tzykun's set design, which was stark, monochromatic—and purposefully ambiguous. Newbury's goal was to tap into the contemporary resonance of war, and how love succeeds or fails to transcend violence. This non-descript (and non-region specific) design was thus charged with exploiting the theme of love—and how it seeks to find footing amidst long-standing strife and animosity.

In the Bellini/Romani version of the legendary story, the audience misses out on the initial courtship between Juliet and Romeo, having to adjust quickly to the fact that the lovers have already met and that they are already deeply in love. The opening scene of *The Capulets and the Montagues* does not necessarily make that clear, and the typical Shakespeare enthusiast might also be confused about whether or not Romeo is recognized upon his arrival at his enemies' shelter. It is quite clear, though, that Juliet is the only woman who has made it to the safety of the bank-vault-turned-bunker, as a vigorous chorus of men (and a sharp, energetic orchestra) set the scene. (Throughout the opera these components offered effective relief from the "stand-and-sing" symptoms inherent to bel canto-style opera.) The fact that Juliet is being given in marriage, against her will, to Tebaldo is also made apparent, since that is the hinge on which the rest of the tragedy unfolds.

As Romeo, Joyce DiDonato upped the ante in Act 1 with "Se Romeo t'uccise un figlio." This single piece revealed all that the Grammy-winning mezzo is famous for: staggering precision and intentional diction, a riveting stage presence, and legitimate acting through deliberate movement and a transparent emotionality. Throughout, DiDonato managed to convey convincingly the physicality of a young man by working a thoughtful inventory of masculine gestures and paying attention to even the smallest of motions, like how Romeo might swipe sweat off his upper lip with his sleeve. DiDonato's practiced nuances were natural enough to help audiences balance the high-voice conundrum: why would a heroic young man sing in a soprano range? The conventions of early 19th-century Italian opera are to blame, but Romani and Bellini did their part to soften this problem by making clear that the emotions with which

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Romeo grapples are more universal than they are gender-specific: frustration, loyalty, love, and lost love are things both men and women relate to.

Bellini offered up more than enough of the requisite vocal virtuosity. DiDonato's "La tremenda ultrice spade" was an exciting example of how a cabaletta should play out, with fluid, accurate runs, detailed and dramatic articulation, and impassioned delivery, all of which count when conveying a soldier's promise of vengeance and brutality. And while DiDonato has the muscle to carry this show, her counterpart made that unnecessary. Nicole Cabell was absolutely on par with DiDonato's level of professionalism and artistry. She created a unique and memorable Juliet with her first recitative and aria, "Eccomi in lieta vesta... Oh quante volte." With only harp and wind punctuations as support, Cabell at first was her weakest, and some pitch inaccuracies crept in at phrase endings of unaccompanied lines. With the famous romanza to follow, however, Cabell immediately burned her voice into the minds and hearts of the Kansas City audience, and it is no doubt that she will be welcomed back to this Lyric stage. Cabell boasted breathtaking and effortless control across her range and smartly integrated style-specific and meaningful ornamentation to melodic lines. In recitatives at the start and end of Act 2, the audience saw the depth of her superb acting capabilities, where communicative facial expressions relayed Juliet's despair at the devastation she saw and felt. Cabell also exhibited a remarkable agitation upon learning that her lover had swallowed fatal poison, and "Morte io non temo" was unbelievable thanks to Cabell's vocal flexibility, which resulted in lilting, sinuous lines.

There has not been a better matched vocal duo than DiDonato and Cabell on the Lyric stage for some time. The pair portrayed well a young couple navigating their own love story amid fear, anxiety, and expectation. A liquid, lovely melding of two stellar voices, both with such purity of timbre and impressive control, was on tap with "Deh, tu bell'anima," the lovers' poignant goodbye (in what is often referred to as the "tomb scene" but here played out in the same bunker setting). It is difficult to put into words how stunning this number was: with two such distinct voices, we heard layer upon layer of lush vocal color, ideally matched, but where each woman's unique resonance truly set her voice apart.

DiDonato's and Cabell's "Si, fuggire" helped the audience to early on determine just how far along Romeo and Juliet's romance had already come, but with the modern spin of this Lyric production, one is left wondering just why a young woman so devoted to her lover would not leave with him. The set, costumes, and props made obvious that this romance was playing out in modern times (the characters were swigging bottled water, after all), and it seems more believable that a young woman of today might well take the opportunity to flee a war-ridden place to gamble on finding a better existence with her partner. Juliet's single utterance about duty and commitment simply did not do enough to convince me that a love-struck teenager would not take off with her boyfriend to do the "it's us against the world" thing. In the original intended time and place of this story, Juliet would have been bound by Renaissance-era convention, where a daughter's devotion to family would absolutely play into such a decision, and in that case such honor-bound resistance makes better sense. Divorced from that patriarchal family construct, though, it was less credible. Nonetheless, their bedroom duet was heart-wrenching, with DiDonato so perfectly frustrated and Cabell so utterly captivating.

Bill Burden's Tebaldo was the weak link of the first half. He failed to command the stage in his Act 1 aria, "È serbato, a questo acciario," sounding constricted where flexibility across scalar passages is key. That early scene was instead secured by Stephen Morscheck's robust, imposing Capellio and Julien Robbins' perfectly trustworthy Lorenzo. Burden languished beautifully on high, sustained pitches, but we lost the first and final syllables of his lines, as if those bel canto runs caught him by surprise. In the Act 2 duet "Stolto! a un sol mio grido," Burden held his own: here he was more precise, but still seemed to labor on fast-moving lines.

What works from Newbury's vision is that the story remains wholly focused on the two young lovers, which was Romani's dramatic intent. The choice to not offer visual scene changes was risky, though; throughout the entire opera the audience is "stuck" in the same physical space, and let's face it—Bellini-style opera is static enough. Juliet's room diverted us some, but it being the habitat of a sad, lonely teenager, it hardly transports the audience much. The curtain did open on Act 2 (after the exquisitely balanced finale quintet, "Soccorso, sostegno accordale, o cielo") to reveal the destruction left after battle, and that visual devastation brought into dramatic focus the turn of events that were matched musically by Bellini's mournful cello writing.

No doubt the Lyric figured on the whole event revolving around DiDonato, and relying on that was not an error by any stretch. She is a favorite in Kansas City for obvious reasons—we stand by our own, and it seems she was born for this role. Still, her work on the Lyric stage Saturday night demonstrated something more important—something that is particularly significant in this new era of the arts in Kansas City: DiDonato is a tangible example for other young musicians, an example to turn to for inspiration toward their own success. So while this production absolutely went beyond "local girl does good," we cannot overlook the significance of this point: in a town full of aspiring young musicians, many studying diligently at local universities and conservatories, working and waiting for that one magical opportunity, DiDonato is the ideal model of what training, diligence, perseverance, and patience can yield.