

Opera off the beaten path offers evolving voices performance opportunities

By Peter Jacobi
H-T Reviewer
5/4/2009

Learning and practicing are critical responsibilities that musicians must undertake. Seeking and finding performance opportunities are follow-up musts, and one could find examples of the follow-ups in two out-of-the-way venues last week: the soon-to-close Cinemat and a studio above the main auditorium in the Musical Arts Center.

At the Cinemat

Steve Volan, who recently announced that economic circumstances have led him to step away from his video store/concert space, decided to present one more concert before he departs the premises in mid-May, and that — of all things — an evening of opera, a first for him.

Seems he was enticed by an “Opera on Tap” project initiated in New York City by an IU music alum, Anne Ricci, that of presenting arias sung by young talents in places where such fare is unexpected, where music and beer can comfortably mingle, where folks not attuned to operatic performances might be enticed to try.

There was little promotion for the Cinemat’s hastily-called event, but a bunch of hardy souls came out on a very rainy night to hear nine arias over beer, fruit juice and the aroma of popcorn. The atmosphere was relaxed. Volan briefly interviewed each singer who, then, stepped on stage to vocalize in front of projections with English translations.

Various stages of vocal development could be heard. Some have a long way to go to get their voice into professional shape, but they were up there striving, undoubtedly learning from exposure to what proved a generously accepting crowd. All participants showed dedication and injected their contribution with energy.

Among the more promising were baritone Justin Merrick, who evocatively and sensitively delivered a dreamily romantic aria from Erich Korngold’s “Die Tote Stadt”; soprano Shareese Johnson, portraying a Puccini heroine, Manon Lescaut, in a passionate remembrance of a young love she’s exchanged for luxury; another soprano, Sharon Harms, finding the drama in a contemplative and soul-struggling selection from Benjamin Britten’s “Peter Grimes”; and bass Mark Sampson, very much into Leporello’s Catalogue aria from Mozart’s “Don Giovanni.”

Volan expressed hope that, outside the Cinemat, “Opera on Tap” might find a home and continuity in Bloomington. Hope shared.

IU upstairs

Carol Vaness, the distinguished soprano with world name recognition who now directs the Graduate Opera Workshop in the Jacobs School, put together two nights of Puccini Friday and Saturday, exhibiting separate casts on each evening in staged performances of one-acters, “Suor Angelica” and “Gianni Schicchi.” Daniela Candillari was the knowing and helpful music director. The pianists, serving as one-instrument orchestras, were Mee Youn Park for “Angelica” and Piotr Wisniewski for “Schicchi.”

This reviewer attended only the Friday event. Here again, one heard evolving singers, some well along the road, others engaged in smaller steps, but all taking advantage of an opportunity to test themselves before a public. Fortunately, strongest in “Suor Angelica,” one of Puccini’s weaker scores, was Kiri Deonarine in the title role. She gave dimension to the nun, burdened by rejection from her family and the death an illegitimate son she had prior to entering the order. Deonarine also displayed a potent and controlled soprano that met Puccini’s demands.

“Schicchi,” one of the composer’s delicious creations, was offered in scene-chewing, often uproarious fashion. Vaness developed what’s essential for this opera, an ensemble to portray a family of jackals dismayed that their wealthy senior, just deceased, had left them virtually nothing in his will. They accept the help of the shrewd Schicchi who agrees to fool a notary into believing he is the wealthy relative, still alive. As, in masquerade, he dictates a new will, he stuns the greedy flock by leaving most of the family goodies to himself.

Baritone Aubrey Allicock was a terrific Schicchi, and there were invaluable contributions from those around him, including Katie Polit as Schicchi’s daughter (who sings the popular and lovely “O mio babbino caro”), tenor Christopher Nelson as her swain and baritone Joseph Beutel as the oldest of the survivors.