

About Opera Viva's Concert by Steven Ang – The Mad Scene

Sunday, April 19th, 2009

Anyway to summarise, it was an evening of hits and misses, with the scales tipped towards the former. Highlights included a *Rinaldo* duet by Ralph McDonald and Amanda Colliver, Julia Abueva's heart-wrenching number from *Miss Saigon*, and scenes from *Fences* (John Sharpley's original opera, interesting music...) and PDQ Bach's *The Stoned Guest*, a hilarious parody of the final scene from *Don Giovanni*.

Without going into details, I'm going to focus this post on the performances of Amanda Colliver and Ralph MacDonald, 2 singers that are probably going to figure heavily with the company's growth. As a duo that took up a significant portion of the program together, these 2 singers come from extreme ends of the singing vs acting dichotomy:

I think that, after 3 performances, I've finally figured out the art of Ralph McDonald: he sounded great tonight, a full and sweet lyric baritone that probably works best in light baroque works than the big demands of Beethoven or Puccini. It's always a pleasure to hear low voices sing coloratura runs with such sureness as those demonstrated in the Handel number (*Al trionfo del nostro furore*). Readers of this blog know that this blogger loves a good coloratura passage. Good coloratura basses are hard to find in these parts so I look forward to hearing more performances like these! But on the 'acting' side of things, I suppose 'stiff' is an only appropriate term to describe his stage presence. One wishes that he would make more use of dramatic lines like "she is not my daughter!" rather than singing it like a vocalise. But to be fair he does follow stage directions quite well.

On the other end of the spectrum, Colliver, possessing a small voice that got thinner as it ascends, shined with a natural radiance that made one overlook her limitations. She is a natural singing actress (of the old fashioned kind before Natalie Dessay turned it into a dirty word), totally in one with the music and the words. In the scenes from Floyd's *Susannah*, she portrayed with every breath and note the loneliness of a 16 year-old, using only gestures to turn an empty stage into a rural Southern American village. I've heard recordings of these arias by Renee Fleming and Cheryl Studer, stars with much substantial vocal instruments, but Colliver fully makes this music her own, turning in a sublime performance that makes comparisons pointless. As to technical matters, I should note that while the voice may be small, it is always right on pitch and never pressed for volume even in the top notes.

So as a team, I suppose that this pairing would work by trading off the strengths of one another: the smooth lyrical baritone of the primo uomo paired with the dramatic chops of the prima donna. Hopefully they will both inspire each other to greater heights of vocal beauty and dramatic truth.

Another point to note: when attending a concert at the NAFA hall, never get tickets in the first 3 rows! With my best interests in mind, the well-intentioned organisers got me a pair

of seats located at the centre of row 3 so that I could observe the action up-close. From here, countertenor Chia Wee Kiat sounded rather thin in his *Giulio Cesare* number, an opinion also shared by my friend. Imagine my surprise when my friends sitting a few rows back described his voice as PIERCING. So I changed seats during intermission and sure enough, the sound took on a much fuller, rounder quality. My apologies to the singer for not being able to give a fully-informed review, perhaps next time...

<http://themadscene.athenarts.com>