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ARTS | ARTS IN REVIEW | OPERA REVIEW

# ‘Emmeline,’ ‘Richard the Lionheart’ and ‘La Rondine’ Reviews

Three very different types of lovers in these operas in St. Louis.

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John Irvin as Matthew and Joyce El-Khoury as Emmeline. *PHOTO: KEN HOWARD*

By **HEIDI WALESON**

Updated June 22, 2015 6:16 p.m. ET

*St. Louis*

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Emmeline

Through June 27

Richard the Lionheart

Through June 26

La Rondine

Through June 28

Opera Theatre of Saint Louis

Tobias Picker’s “Emmeline” (1996) remains one of the best operas written in the past 25 years, but it has not had a full U.S. production since the original Santa Fe Opera production was revived at New York City Opera in 1998. Opera Theatre of Saint Louis has rectified that omission with a striking, elegantly cast new staging, and with any luck it will follow OTSL’s fine 2004 “Nixon in China” revival into many opera houses around the country.

“Emmeline” is based on a true mid-19th-century story: A 14-year-old girl, sent to work in a textile mill in Massachusetts to help her impoverished family, is seduced by the

factory owner's married son-in-law. Her child is given up for adoption. Twenty years later, she falls in love with a young man named Matthew Gurney, and marries him, only to discover that he is her son. He flees; Emmeline remains, a pariah in her town, waiting for her child to come back.

Stark, fast-moving and immersive, Mr. Picker's music and J.D. McClatchy's libretto limn the bleakness of Emmeline's oppressively pious community, the mechanistic clatter of the looms, and the yearning hopefulness of the heroine. Only she sings poetry—"The night grinds the day into stars." The dramatic fabric is tightly woven: The wrenching music of the opening funeral scene, in which Aunt Hannah takes the silent girl away from her family, returns at the end, as Emmeline, once again bereft, but now able to choose for herself, thinks back on her life.

Joyce El-Khoury captured that journey in the title role. The Emmeline of Act I is a vulnerable child; in Act II, she is an adult, and her vocal writing deepens and expands accordingly. Ms. El-Khoury's affecting soprano is not conventionally pretty; it has a grainy, expressive quality that catches the ear. She takes the high notes at the ends of phrases with a determination that fits the character in all her innocence and strength, and when she tells Matthew (whom she does not yet know is her son) "I love you more than I love God himself," this is no throwaway line.

As Aunt Hannah, the powerful contralto Meredith Arwady was the soul of righteousness but also sympathetic. John Irvin's light, appealing tenor was ideal for Matthew's youth and simplicity. Bass-baritone Wayne Tigges was a predatory Mr. Maguire, transparently playing up the seducer's sleazy Irish charm. Standouts among the supporting singers included soprano Nicole Haslett as Sophie, a mill girl, and tenor Geoffrey Agpalo as the factory foreman. The chorus was excellent, turning on a dime from support to accusation; the orchestra, under George Manahan, sounded splendid.

Director James Robinson's taut production was realistic and unsentimental. Allen Moyer's turntable set, with looms, a twisted tree and weathered New England walls rotating through, reflected the starkness of the opera while giving it context, as did Christopher Akerlind's lighting and use of silhouetting. James Schuette's period costumes were buttoned up and severe, but still individual: these are not archetypes, but real people.

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Handel wrote "Richard the Lionheart" ("Riccardo Primo," 1727) as a showcase for a trio of superstars, the castrato Senesino and the sopranos Francesca Cuzzoni and Faustina Bordoni. It has one of his clunkier plots: Richard, en route to the Crusades, and Costanza, his bride-to-be, whom he has not yet met, are both shipwrecked on a remote

island with a tyrannical ruler, Isacio, who takes one look at Costanza and wants her for himself. Negotiation, trickery, betrayal and war ensue, but the virtue and uprightness of Richard and his aptly named future consort win the day.

OTSL assembled a high-caliber cast headed by the impressive Tim Mead as Richard. His countertenor is easy and secure, precise in recitatives and superbly agile in the fast sections; and he is persuasive both as valiant warrior and lover. Susannah Biller brought a pealing, clear-toned soprano to the role of Costanza. She was affecting in the character's numerous laments, and she and Mr. Mead were meltingly beautiful in the splendid love duet that closes Act II—their first-ever meeting. Bass-baritone Brandon Cedel was fierce as the tyrant Isacio; Devon Guthrie was smoldering and feisty as his daughter, Pulcheria, whom he tries to use in his nefarious schemes; Tai Oney brought a handsome, somewhat mellower countertenor to Pulcheria's lover, Oronte. Conductor Grant Llewellyn led a spirited performance.

Jean-Marc Puissant's shipwreck set loomed over the action, and his 18th-century costumes pointed up the difference between the "civilized" English and the piratical islanders. Director Lee Blakeley (who also created the serviceable\ English text) mapped out the constant reversals of fortune effectively, though his ending puzzlingly undercut the score's happy resolution: Costanza appeared to go mad in her last aria, and in the finale, the women looked angry and several bodies in hanging cages dropped down from the flies. Perhaps he was suggesting that the English are not so virtuous after all.

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Puccini's "La Rondine" (1917), an enchanting, bittersweet work in which the courtesan Magda finds true love but is finally too honest to marry her tainted self to her innocent beloved, benefited from a sensitive orchestral performance conducted by Stephen Lord. The principals had more trouble with the style. As Magda, soprano Corinne Winters displayed an attractively smoky timbre in her lower register, but her high notes were strained and she often pushed too hard in the dreamy, falling-in-love scenes of Acts I and II. This technique worked better in the more melodramatic confrontation and breakup of Act III. As her student lover Ruggero, Anthony Kalil showed off a one-dimensional but sturdy tenor. John McVeigh was charmingly rueful as the poet Prunier; Sydney Mancasola was an amusing, giddy Lisette, the maid.

Alexander Dodge's simple but evocative sets (Paris, the Riviera) and Gregory Gale's costumes set the piece around World War I, with military uniforms on some of the men and narrow-skirted, neutral-colored attire for Magda and her fellow sophisticates. They were complemented by Michael Gieleta's lively direction, but the English translation by Robert Hess, boasting phrases like "your mysterious enigma," was unintentionally laughable.

*Ms. Waleson writes about opera for the Journal.*

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