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THE SUNDAY TIMES

## Bleedin' brilliant

Guglielmo Ratcliff's thrilling cast brought Italian style to a Wexford weekend

Hugh Canning Published: 1 November 2015



Undoubted hit: Mariangela Sicilia and Angelo Villari in Wexford's Guglielmo (Clive Barda)

The Irish alchemy that has drawn collectors of *recherché* opera year after year to the southeast corner of the Emerald Isle once again worked its magic at the 64th Wexford Festival. This tiny estuarial fishing town must be the smallest place in the world to boast an international lyric theatre — last year named as Ireland's National Opera House — and, opened in 2008, it is a jewel; intimate and inviting with its glossy interior, but with a large enough stage to showcase operas intended for much larger spaces.

This autumn's repertoire was yet more catnip for operatic epicures, three main-stage works by composers of repute: Frederick Delius, admittedly more prized for his orchestral than his dramatic works; Pietro Mascagni, immortalised by his first-try hit, *Cavalleria Rusticana* (1890), which he never surpassed; and Ferdinand Hérold, remembered by balletomanes for his charming, if much tinkered-with, score to *La fille mal gardée*.

Hérold's 1832 *opéra-comique*, **Le pré aux clercs** — a park in the shadow of the Louvre palace — is a light-hearted piece about a self-willed young lady at the court of Marguerite de Valois who uses the cover of carnival and swashbuckling friends to escape from an unwanted marriage into the arms of her true love. It's a slight piece, unmemorably tuneful but toe-tappy, and Wexford's staging, shared with Paris's Opéra-Comique, did it prettily and picturesquely.

Revived by Laurent Delvert and directed by Eric Ruf, *Le pré aux clercs* has the queen's court cavorting in sumptuous period costumes (Renato Bianchi) in a glade of perambulating trees. Jean-Luc Tingaud conducted the musical numbers — including catchy ensembles and a coloratura showpiece for the heroine, Isabelle, deftly negotiated by the lovely Marie-Eve Munger — with brio, and it was a joy to hear idiomatic French accents in the spoken dialogue. Eric Huchet as the jester Cantarelli, Marie Lenormand formidable as the queen, and Dominique Côté as the dastardly Comte de Comminges brought their roles vividly to life. Of the opera's historical background — the wars of religion that culminated in the St Bartholomew's Day Massacre — there was nary a hint in Hérold's music or dramaturgy.

This fluffy soufflé completed a three-course offering that began with Delius's plantation opera, **Koanga**, a work renowned more for its exotic dance sequence, *La Calinda*, than for its vocal and dramatic content. It is no surprise *Koanga* has never really held the stage in the English-speaking world. The plotting is convoluted, thin and, for today, politically incorrect: a thwarted love match between an enslaved voodoo prince and Palmyra, daughter of a white father and an African-American slave, that climaxes, if that's the word, in *Koanga's* death and Palmyra's suicide.

Although Wexford couldn't run to the requisite chorus of black singers as the slaves, Michael Gioleta's stylish staging (sets by James Macnamara, costumes by Sarah Roberts) made as good a case as possible for *Koanga* without vindicating it as a neglected masterpiece. Stephen Barlow, the conductor, clearly believes in the score and got the Wexford Festival Orchestra to sound as if it did, too. There were striking performances from Norman Garrett as a physically imposing *Koanga*, Nozuko Teto as the ravishingly sung Palmyra and Aubrey Allicock as Uncle Joe, the narrator in the weakish prologue and epilogue.

The undoubted hit was the meaty main course, Mascagni's period melodrama **Guglielmo Ratcliff**, based on Heine's all-but-forgotten historic drama about vendettas between warring Scottish aristos. Think an 18th-century *Lucia di Lammermoor* with "*verismo*" tunes and another dash of resurrectionism. Wexford wisely put this problem piece in the hands of Italians committed to showing the work in the best light. The conductor Francesco Cilluffo and director Fabio Ceresa gave us a spooky, gothic show involving werewolves — the pets of the madwoman Margherita (sung with Azucena-like relish by Annunziata Vestri), which turn out to be the spirits of Ratcliff's victims (he murders the suitors of his beloved Maria on the eve of their weddings) — and fascinating mirror play. Tiziano Santi's atmospheric sets and Giuseppe Palella's handsome costumes lent an

eerie Ruritanian decadence to the proceedings, entirely appropriate to the fantastical element of Mascagni's piece.

As anyone who listened to last night's live Radio 3 relay, available for a month on iPlayer, will have discovered, the principals are thrilling: Angelo Villari sings the allegedly unsingable title role with a combination of virile, trumpety "squillo" and genuine musicianship — a discovery! — while Mariangela Sicilia's lovely Maria is serenely idiomatic. Wexford sounded like the finest small Italian opera company this side of the Alps last weekend.

The Royal Opera's second collaboration with the Sam Wanamaker Playhouse — after Kasper Holten's staging of Cavalli's L'Ormindo — is Luigi Rossi's **Orpheus**, written for the court of the young Louis XIV in 1647. Christian Curnyn's period band plays impeccably in the musicians' gallery, revealing an opera packed with sublime musical beauties. On a tiny stage cluttered with superfluous furniture, Keith Warner's coarse panto staging bludgeons the comedy and restricts his cast's movement. Happily, at least three of the singers — Caitlin Hulcup's impassioned Aristaeus, Siobhan Stagg's moving Orpheus (replacing a sick Mary Bevan) and Louise Alder's gorgeously sung Eurydice — transcend the clunky presentation. Rossi's opera is a hidden gem, worthy of better than this.

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