



HIROKO MASUIKE FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

Il Caso Mortara From left, Daniel Quintana, Peter Furlong, Michael Callas, Iulia Merca and Jake Glickman in this new work commissioned from the young Italian composer Francesco Cilluffo. Set in 1850s Bologna, it opened at Dicapo Opera Theater on Thursday night.

Boy Is Ensnared in 19th-Century Papal Politics

For nearly 30 years the scrappy Dicapo Opera Theater has presented a healthy number of contemporary works by Barber, Menotti, Britten and, last season, Tobias Picker (“Emmeline”). On Thursday night this small company took a big step with the premiere of its first commissioned work: “Il Caso Mortara” (“The Mortara Case”), by Francesco Cilluffo, a 31-year-old Italian composer.

That’s right. An American company commissioned an Italian composer to write a new opera, in Italian — the first time this has happened, the directors of Dicapo assert, since the Metropolitan Opera commissioned Puccini’s “Fanciulla del West,” which had its premiere 100 years ago.

This project might seem retro, but the idea of tapping an emerging Italian composer was so exotic that it was actually adventurous. What matters, of course, is

Additional performances of “Il Caso Mortara” will be on Saturday, Friday and March 7 at Dicapo Opera Theater, St. Jean Baptiste Catholic Church, 184 East 76th Street, Manhattan; (212) 288-9438, dicapo.com.

whether the new opera is any good. While I was not quite sure what to make of “Il Caso Mortara,” I was drawn into the story and Mr. Cilluffo’s pungent, lush, often inventive score. With a libretto by the composer, “Il Caso Mortara” is based on a real incident that provoked anti-papal furor in Italy and throughout Europe.

It begins with a prologue in Bologna in 1851. A grievously ill infant, Edgardo, the youngest child of Jewish parents, Salamone and Marianna Mortara, is secretly baptized by a nursemaid hoping to save his soul. The scene then shifts to 1858, when two papal officers arrive at the Mortara home to claim the boy, now 6. According to Vatican law at the time, a baptized child could not be raised in a Jewish home.

Pope Pius IX, driven by righteousness and paternal longing, takes Edgardo under his protection and raises him like a son. Edgardo becomes a priest. The opera follows his adult life until 1940, when, 89 and ill, he dies in Belgium moments before two Nazi soldiers arrest him. Under Nazi law, Edgardo was still a Jew.

Mr. Cilluffo brought an impressive background to the writing of this two-hour score. He graduated from the Turin Conservatory in composition and conducting

and furthered his training in London, eventually completing a Ph.D. in composition at King’s College, where he studied with the composer George Benjamin, among others. He was inspired to write this opera after hearing Mr. Picker’s “Emmeline.” Indeed, Mr. Picker provided his young admirer with the story idea and crucial guidance.

I liked Mr. Cilluffo’s music the

A commissioned opera, in Italian, makes its debut.

most whenever it turned modernist and fitful, as in the early scene when the boy is seized: a tormented, complex ensemble pulsing with highly charged, spiky music. At its strongest, the composer’s instinctive feeling for Italianate lyricism is broken up intriguingly with jagged, fragmented melodic phrases. There are sometimes hints of Dallapiccola in his preserialist mode.

But in long scenes Mr. Cilluffo may have been overly intent on honoring tradition. There are perhaps too many set-piece arias

and melodramatic ensembles that crest to sweeping climaxes.

The story covers nearly 90 years, and Mr. Cilluffo has devised creative ways of summarizing events. A narrated interlude depicts Edgardo as a priest on a series of world tours and pilgrimages. In the final scene, as Edgardo dies, he has a vision of his suffering mother, who died years earlier. In the classic tradition of Italian opera, the two characters are pitted in an agitated duet, with offstage chorus.

Mr. Cilluffo conceived the work for the 26-piece Dicapo opera orchestra, conducted here ably by Pacien Mazzagatti. The cast was strong, especially the intense, big-voiced mezzo-soprano Iulia Merca as Edgardo’s suffering mother; the magisterial tenor Peter Furlong as the aggrieved, defiant father; the sturdy baritone Chad Armstrong as Pope Pius IX, a richly complex and conflicted character; and the plaintive tenor Christopher DeVage as the sometimes curiously impassive Edgardo.

The company is clearly delighted with the results of this unconventional commission. Michael Capasso, Dicapo’s general manager, who directed the simple and effective production, announced that they were already planning a revival next season.