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Concert Reviews and Features

ITALIAN OPERA WORLD PREMIERE AT DICAPO

Dicapo Opera Theatre, New York; February 25, 2010

For the first time in one hundred years, New York has been host to the world premiere of an opera by an Italian composer, in Italian – the last one was Puccini’s “La fanciulla del west.” Commissioned by the ambitious, forward-looking Dicapo Opera Theatre with the blessing of Artistic Advisor Tobias Picker (“Emmeline,” “An American Tragedy”), Francesco Cilluffo’s “Il Caso Mortara” had its debut on Thursday, February 25th. In attendance, in addition to the composer and Mr Picker, were composers Ned Rorem and David Del Tredici. Quite an event.

The thirty-one year old Mr Cilluffo has fine conducting credentials (London, Glasgow, Turin, Beirut) and has composed both instrumental and vocal music. “Il Caso Mortara” is based on the true story of Edgardo Mortara (1851-1940), who, as a Jewish child in Bologna, was secretly baptized by a servant girl. When the Church discovered this (Jews were not allowed to raise Christians), Edgardo was torn from the family home and taken to Rome, where he became a ward of Pope Pius IX. He was ordained as a priest and proselytized widely (Spain, New York, Germany, Belgium); his Jewish identity became known when he was in Belgium in 1940, and he died moments before the Nazis were about to arrest him. The opera covers the scandal surrounding the kidnapping, Edgardo’s parents’ attempts to get him back, and the emotional turmoil caused by the Church’s actions.

The opera is filled with dramatic possibilities and Mr Cilluffo takes advantage of them. Early on, Edgardo’s mother laments and protests as her son is being taken away; there is a fine contrapuntal chorus of protestors in the first act and another of victory in the second act, as Italian unity is declared; Pope and father have a confrontation, as do Mortara and his brother when the latter comes to tell Edgardo, now a priest, of their mother’s madness and death, which haunt Edgardo in the opera’s final scene. The well-orchestrated score with brass punctuations at the right moments and tender, commenting strings at others, is tonal with some dark astringencies; it does not break any new ground musically but

it tells its story well. It lacks only a recognizable melody or two – the arias for the Pope in act one and the father in act two are lyrical but not melodically memorable.

Standouts in the cast are Romanian mezzo Iulia Merca, offering a touching, well-sung portrayal of Edgardo's mother, Chad Armstrong's surprisingly sympathetic Pope, Christopher De Vage's alternately pious and tormented Edgardo and Peter Furlong's sturdy tenorial Father. Pacien Mazzagatti leads the orchestra with verve and manages to keep the ensembles clear and precise.

The sparse sets by John Farrell work well enough; the handsome costumes by Ildiko Marta Debrezzeni even better. Michale Capasso's direction keeps things moving and scores particular points with the choruses and in a late split-stage scene in which both Pope and Father think fondly of Edgardo. In all, an intelligent new work, well-performed.

There will be further performances of "Il caso Mortara" on February 27th and March 5th and 7th.

Robert Levine

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