A delightful show by a cast that clicks

OPERA REVIEW

Handel's Ariodante
Opera in Concert,
The Jane Mallett Theatre, Toronto

By Tamara Bernstein

The short version of this review is that the Opera in Concert's production of Handel's *Ariodante* was one of the most blissful opera performances I've ever attended.

To be sure, the predominantly Canadian cast, headed by the splendid expatriate mezzo-soprano Kimberly Barber and conducted by Gary Thor Wedow, had looked promising. But within minutes it was clear that this was one of those rare occasions where the casting is perfect; something clicks between the performers, and magic happens.

Like many Handel operas, *Ariodante* was neglected until relatively recently — Saturday's performance was in fact its Toronto premiere. Written in 1734, it tells the story of the noble prince Ariodante (Barber) and the Princess Ginevra (soprano Frèdèrique Vèzina), who are in love and betrothed to one another. But the Duke Polinesso (mezzo-soprano Allyson McHardy) — "a proud, ambitious Man, and of a wicked Nature," as the libretto describes him, — tricks Ariodante into believing that Ginevra has been sleeping with him. Truth and love eventually prevail, but not before Handel has put the characters through the full gamut of emotions, in one of his finest creations. Barber was luminous as Ariodante — her voice exhilaratingly free; her face transparently reflecting the Prince's emotions. (And how often do we have the chance to experience this calibre of singing in an intimate theatre like the Jane Mallett?)

Handel wrote this role for the celebrated castrato Giovanni Carestini, and provided daunting coloratura arias to display his virtuosity. But Barber never settled for mere display: The coloratura always sprang directly from the emotions, whether it was the quasi-sexual ecstasy of *Con l'ali de constanza* (On the wings of constancy) or the triumph of life, nobility and love over death and darkness in *Dopo notte.*

But the knockout aria was *Scherza infida*, where Ariodante reaches the depths of despair, and the muted orchestra accompanies with painful but caressing dissonances. Barber's deeply moving performance was matched by exquisite playing — particularly from bassoonist Nadina Jackson. Barbara Hannigan's soprano — light and agile yet strong as steel — made her perfect for Dalinda, Ginevra's lady-in-waiting, whose ill-judged but all-consuming passion for Polinesso enables him to use her as a pawn. McHardy's rich mezzo-soprano and dominatrix-style sexiness, meanwhile, made it easy to understand how Polinesso could ensnare Dalinda.

Vèzina was the discovery of the evening. Her rich soprano and radiant characterization conveyed the princess's nobility and innocence; as Ginevra journeyed through betrayal to a deeper love and wisdom, it was hard to believe that Vèzina is an undergraduate at McGill University, and was filling in on short notice for Jacklyn Short.

Daniel Lichti was both commanding and genial as the King (Ginevra's father); tenor Eric Shaw did a fine job as Ariodante's brother Lurcanio. But I think that the spark in this production came not only from its bull's eye musicality, but also from the sophisticated wit and joy with which the performers, and dramatic advisor Guillermo Silva-Marin, embraced the sexual ambiguity — and titillation — of the cross-dressing.

McHardy, in tight black pants and a low V-necked black top,looked — and acted — as though she'd stepped out of the cover of a 1950s lesbian pulp novel. (I must thank my companion for the evening for putting her finger on this resemblance.)

Barber's elegant trouser outfit evoked 18th-century aristocratic male dress, and gave her a graceful androgyny. But there was never any question, to my eye and ear, that she was singing as a woman disguised as a man. It was a great idea to have most of the women in the orchestra, which was of course on stage, wearing tuxedo-like suits.

It's a measure not only of Wedow's skill, but also of the maturity of Toronto's instrumental community, that a pickup orchestra of modern instruments could do such a convincing and committed job. The articulation was clean; the pacing never flagged. Apart from a short solo by the concertmaster, the strings kept their vibrato to a minimum; except for some oversights in Polinesso's first aria, the orchestra responded sensitively to the singers' nuances. The chorus sang too loudly, but they only made a couple of brief appearances.

In all, it was an exhilarating evening; a real triumph for both Opera in Concert, and Toronto's patron saint of baroque opera, Peter Sandor, whose philanthropy made this production, like so many others, possible. Too bad it only ran for two performances — let's hope they'll encore it soon.

LaBernstein@aol.com

National Post

NATIONAL POST, MONDAY, APRIL 2, 2001