

Glimmerglass Opera Soars with Works from Silly to Sublime

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Victoria Munro in The Glimmerglass Festival's 2013 production of David Lang's the little match girl passion. *Credits: Karli Cadel/The Glimmerglass Festival*

COOPERSTOWN, NY – What a season this has been for Glimmerglass Opera Festival in Cooperstown, NY! Wagner, Verdi, Lerner and Loewe, and the rarely heard Pergolisi and David Lang make up the quartet of productions.

The double-billed “Stabat Mater” and “The Little Match Girl Passion” were the most dark and disturbing selections. Giovanni Battista Pergolesi’s 1736 masterpiece, “Stabat Mater,” explores the emotions of Jesus’ mother, Mary, during and following his crucifixion. Hauntingly staged with an enormous movable cross in a set design by Marjorie Bradley Kellogg and under the direction of Jessica Lang, the vocalists Anthony Roth Constanzo, counter tenor, and Nadine Sierra were surrounded by dancers in various stages of mourning. Constanzo, in particular, was distinctive in his voice and interpretation. Sierra movingly conveyed the agony of a

mother bereft. The conductor was Speranza Scappucci.

Because it’s a ‘tough act to follow,’ the choice of Hans Christian Anderson’s “The Little Match Girl,” was a good fit as another sorrowful tale. Directed by Francesca Zambello (artistic and general director at Glimmerglass), the story conveyed a purity of spirit despite the cruel treatment of the child and her sad ending. Composer David Lang said he developed much of the atonal chanting by selecting phrases from the King James Bible based on St. Paul’s passage, “When I was a child, I spake as a child.” The mix of Hebrew, Greek and English created a kind of staccato beat. Julia Mintzer, James Michael Porter, Lisa Williamson and Christian Zarembo formed the vocal ensemble. A large cast of children served as a moving backdrop. David Moody conducted.

But from those somber notes, a totally lighthearted romp took place with Giuseppe Verdi’s “King for a Day.” The pompous pretender to the throne was played with haughty disdain by Alex Lawrence. (Shades of John Cleese in his Monty Python days.) Why Verdi never wrote more comic operas is a puzzle, as this one is hilarious throughout. Or maybe it’s Christian Rath’s direction that piles on the exaggerated twists and turns.



L to R: Ensemble members Jason Fowler, Anne O'Donnell, Danny Lindgren, Elliot Peterson and Maurio Hines in The Glimmerglass Festival's production of Pergolesi's Stabat Mater. *Credits: Karli Cadel/The Glimmerglass Festival*

The Marchesa, in an exuberant performance by Ginger Costa-Jackson, sees that the supposed king is actually her former lover, Belfiore. She confides her feelings to her toy poodle during a priceless scene, followed by a merry romp with Belfiore. Giulietta, played by Jacqueline Echols, is to marry the gruff La Rocca (Andrew Wilkowske), but she pines for Edoardo (Patrick O'Halloran). After much confusion, matters more or less right themselves in the end. But not until we've had a delightful time trying to keep track of the lovers and their intricate maneuvers. Joseph Colaneri conducted and Court Watson contributed the colorful set and costumes.



Jason Hardy as Baron Kelbar and Alex Lawrence as Belfiore in The Glimmerglass Festival's 2013 production of Verdi's *King for a Day*. Credits: Karli Cadel/The Glimmerglass Festival

"The Flying Dutchman" also deals with love, but on a tragic plain. It seems Ryan McKinney, as the Dutchman, must travel the seas unless he is saved by the love of a woman. The woman he meets is Senta, in a powerful performance by Melody Moore. She is willing to follow him on his ship, but he misunderstands her intention to break off with Erik (Jay Hunter Morris) and leaves without her. She ultimately kills herself. The staging of this opera is striking, with sets by James Noone and lighting by Mark McCullough. At one point there's a dream-like/nightmarish quality with blood-lit walls in a spidery background of suffering female figures. John Keenan conducted this heartbreaking opera.

All is forgiven in the regal, wonderful visions of "Camelot." Frederick Loewe and Alan Jay Lerner followed "My Fair Lady" with this mythic tale based on T.H. White's "The Once and

Future King." Originally directed and staged by Moss Hart, the musical features "What Do the Simple Folks Do," "The Merry Month of May" and, of course, the title song.

Long associated with the Kennedy administration, this Camelot, too, was not destined to last. Nathan Gunn as Sir Lancelot delivers the wistful "If Ever I Should Leave You." Andriana Chuchman is a lovely and lyrical Guenevere and David Pittsinger a robust and honorable Arthur. Conductor James Lowe, director Robert Longbottom and set designer Kevin Depinet bring their talents to this stunning tableau. Paul Tazewell's costumes help re-imagine that mythical kingdom and the music is unforgettable.

A bonus this past weekend was a talk by Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg. She introduced excerpts from operas that feature lawyers, such as Gilbert and Sullivan's "Trial by Jury," Benjamin Britten's "Billy Budd," Jake Heggie and Terrence McNally's "Dead Man Walking," George Bizet's "Carmen" and Richard Wagner's "Das Rheingold." A new piece, "Anita's Story" was sung by Patrice Michaels, Dr. Ginsburg's daughter-in-law.

In addition to opera, Glimmerglass Festival features musical showcases, scenic "changovers" of sets, backstage tours and related exhibits at The Fennimore Art Museum. The 2014 season will include "Madame Butterfly," by Giacomo Puccini, "Ariadne in Naxos" by Richard Strauss, "An American Tragedy" by Tobias Picker (based on the Theodore Dreiser novel) and Rodgers and Hammerstein's "Carousel."

For more information on Glimmerglass Festival, call 607-547-2255 or visit Glimmerglass.org.