

Caramoor festival scores with Donizetti rarity

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KATONAH, N.Y. -- Two unfamiliar ladies made appearances at the Caramoor International Music Festival - one long-anticipated, the other a last-minute surprise.

The scheduled event was a concert performance Saturday night of Gaetano Donizetti's neglected 1843 opera "Maria di Rohan," the next-to-last of that prolific composer's 65 completed operas.

"Maria" is a fascinating transitional work that bridges the restraints of the heavily ornamented bel canto style and the headlong romanticism that would become the hallmark of Giuseppe Verdi. In fact, it foreshadows that composer's "Un Ballo in Maschera" ("A Masked Ball") in numerous ways, from plot twists down to the very name of the tenor character, Riccardo.

It's full of gripping arias, duets and ensembles, including a marvelous Act I finale in which the chorus sings an anthem-like hymn to France (shades of La Marseillaise!) while the principals reflect on their lives in agitated counterpoint. Striking too is the way the three short acts hurtle toward a stark conclusion that denies the heroine a traditional final solo, let alone a mad scene.



In this photo released by the Caramoor International Music Festival, tenor Luciano Botelho performs in Donizetti's "Maria Di Rohan," Saturday, July 24, 2010 in Katonah, N.Y. (AP Photo/Gabe Palacio, Caramoor International Music Festival) (Gabe Palacio - AP)



In this photo released by the Caramoor International Music Festival, Luciano Botelho, tenor, and Jennifer Rowley, soprano, conductor Will Crutchfield, and the Orchestra of St. Luke's perform Donizetti's "Maria Di Rohan," Saturday, July 24, 2010 in Katonah, N.Y. (AP Photo/Gabe Palacio, Caramoor International Music Festival) (Gabe Palacio - AP)

The evening's unexpected visitor was the soprano who took on the title role as the Countess of Rohan, a noblewoman in the Parisian court of Louis XIII who is torn between love for the tenor and obligation to her baritone husband, Enrico.

When rising star Takesha Meshe Kizart became ill and canceled the day before the performance, her understudy, Jennifer Rowley, stepped in with just one rehearsal.

To say that the young singer from Ohio acquitted herself well would be severe understatement. Rowley proved fully equal to the demands of a role that requires both coloratura dexterity and dramatic power beyond the limits of a lyric soprano. She can sing with melting purity, but her voice also takes on an intriguing, dark-tinged color at times. A few high notes turned shrill under pressure; more often they rang out thrillingly, with a satiny sheen at the top of her range.

Perhaps most impressive of all, given the circumstances, was her involvement in the role dramatically and her ability in a concert performance to make the countess's somewhat implausible plight seem compelling.



At the end, her eyes brimmed with tears in response to the cheers from an audience that had filled the tented Venetian Theater despite oppressive heat and humidity.

In the role of the hapless Riccardo, Brazilian tenor Luciano Botelho was making his American debut. He is clearly a talented singer with a sweet, plaintive sound and a nice facility in bel canto. He started off rockily, as if trying too hard, with some awkward high notes and an audible gasp for breath, but he soon became more comfortable. He was, however, disadvantaged by partnering Rowley, whose voice and physical presence both are several sizes larger than his.

As Maria's vengeful husband, baritone Scott Bearden sang with lots of volume and vehemence but little warmth or variation in tone. Mezzo-soprano Vanessa Cariddi romped with flair through her one aria in the

"trousers" role of the meddlesome courtier di Gondì.

Will Crutchfield, the guiding hand behind Bel Canto at Caramoor, also guided the Orchestra of St. Luke's through a spirited performance of the score. If the sound was sometimes more ragged than usual, blame the weather.



In this photo released by the Caramoor International Music Festival, soprano Jennifer Rowley, center, acknowledges applause following her performance in Donizetti's "Maria Di Rohan," Saturday, July 24, 2010 in Katonah, N.Y. In the front row are, left to right, mezzo-soprano Vanessa Cariddi, baritone Scott Bearden, tenor Luciano Botelho, Rowley, conductor Will Crutchfield, and baritone Jorell Williams. The Orchestra of St. Luke's is behind them. (AP Photo/Gabe Palacio, Caramoor International Music Festival) (Gabe Palacio - AP)

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