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THE Arts

In the Heat of a Summer Night, Fanning Donizetti's Flames of Operatic Ardor

KATONAH, N.Y. — Like a dressmaker altering an outfit to suit local styles, Donizetti refitted his opera “Maria di Rohan” to reflect differing tastes and expectations in various European cities. First fashioned for Vienna, the libretto and roles were retailored for Paris and Naples. The

MUSIC REVIEW

VIVIEN SCHWEITZER

work received a rare outing at Caramoor on Saturday evening, in the Viennese version, with a few items included from later editions, as part of the excellent Bel Canto at Caramoor series.

Takesha Meshé Kizart, the lustrous soprano scheduled to sing the title role, withdrew on Friday because of illness, but the show went on with Jennifer Rowley as her impressive replacement after just one rehearsal. It was difficult to breathe, let alone sing, in the oppressive heat on Saturday, and you pitied the male singers (and the conductor, Will Crutchfield) in their suits and tuxedos. But the cast valiantly sweated through the three-act work in a semistaged performance as audience members frantically fanned themselves.

“Maria di Rohan,” from the end of Donizetti’s career, is based on “A Duel Under Cardinal Richelieu,” a play by Lockroy and Badon, with text by the prominent librettist Salvatore Cammarano. The opera had its premiere in 1843 in Vienna, where it was considered experimental. The score is advanced for its time in the way Donizetti sets recitative verse to lyrical music, and it profoundly influenced Verdi. The libretto had to be tinkered with to appease Viennese and Italian censors.

The tense political and romantic drama takes place in the court of Louis XIII and is dominated by the



SUSAN FARLEY FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

Maria di Rohan This Donizetti opera, featuring Scott Bearden and Jennifer Rowley, was performed on Saturday as part of the Bel Canto at Caramoor series in Katonah, N.Y.

unseen figure of Cardinal Richelieu, who has tried to outlaw duels, on pain of death. Maria, Countess of Rohan, is secretly and unhappily married to Enrico, the Duke of Chevreuse, who is condemned to death for killing Richelieu’s nephew in a duel. Maria asks Riccardo, the Count of Chalais and her former lover, who still pines for her, to save Enrico, which he does.

The plot unfolds with a resuscitated love affair between Maria and Riccardo, misplaced loyalty, duels, political intrigue, a secret tunnel and an illicit love letter. In the final scene Riccardo commits suicide, and Enrico condemns Maria to a life of infamy.

“You think the fat lady will get to sing,” said Philip Gossett, a scholar of Italian opera, in a preconcert lecture, but Donizetti denied his heroine the final aria she might normally have been allotted.

Still, Ms. Rowley had plenty of other opportunities to shine, as in “Cupa fatal mestizia,” her poignantly

rendered Act I aria. Throughout, she sang with a fluid, darkly rich voice and expressively conveyed Maria’s anguish over her affair with Riccardo and her guilt for betraying her nice-guy husband.

In that role, Scott Bearden sang with a booming baritone and offered a theatrically compelling portrait, despairing as Enrico’s happiness is suddenly shattered. Luciano Botelho, a Brazilian tenor in his American debut, offered a passionate, expressively sung interpretation of Riccardo, although there were a few glitches in the first act.

The mezzo-soprano Vanessa Cariddi feistily stirred up trouble in the pants role of Armando di Gondi (originally written for tenor). Adam Walton, Jorell Williams, Neil Darling and Matthew Anchel sang well in smaller roles.

The Orchestra of St. Luke’s played for Mr. Crutchfield with its customary precision (despite a few woodwind mishaps), incisiveness and vigor.

