

OPERA NEWS

Norma

KATONAH, NY
Caramoor Festival
7/10/10



Soprano Angela Meade and conductor Will Crutchfield at the Caramoor Festival's performance of *Norma*
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Bellini's *Norma* is famously the Mount Everest of bel canto roles, but it has often been oddly cast, assigned to dramatic sopranos with no other bel canto credits on their resumé — singers who can offer only a sketch of the music as written. In fact, in my years of attending *Normas*, I have never heard a live performance in which the title role was sung accurately and without compromise — not, at least, until July 10, when Angela Meade sang her first *Norma* in a concert version at the Caramoor Festival.

Meade, who lists Lucia, Anna Bolena and Rossini's Armida in her repertory, has the formidable technique that the role demands. She can summon a range of dynamics from a finely spun pianissimo to an impressive, hall-filling forte, the latter achieved without strain or stridency. In fast passages, the notes emerge clear and in tempo; legato passages are cleanly drawn and well sustained. The voice, sweet and soaring on high, also boasts a tangy lower register. (A soprano without a fully developed lower range is only half a *Norma*.) Her considerable accomplishment at Caramoor brought her ovation after ovation from an audience thrilled to hear the role sung with such aplomb.

From the evidence of the performance, Meade is not yet a complete *Norma*. True, her ability to strike the right vocal stance for the each of the shifting emotions contained in the role was impressive. Through the poise of her singing, she conveyed the radiant calm in the Act II, Scene 2 arioso in which *Norma* contemplates Pollione's return; moments later, she invested the summons to war with the requisite febrile anger. What she couldn't yet achieve was the clear drawing of a dramatic through-line — the sense of a single character moving through the role's mercurial emotional shifts. To take one example, she made an impressive showing in the tricky "Adalgisa fia punita" passage in the duet "In mia man," articulating the low trills accurately and vividly in a clear statement of *Norma*'s rage. But she didn't suggest the vulnerability and desperate passion that had brought the priestess to that moment. This kind of accomplishment, of course, demands artistry of the very highest order, and there is every possibility, given Meade's prodigious gifts, that she will some day achieve it.

The performance was part of the venerable "Bel Canto at Caramoor" series. Conductor Will Crutchfield, bringing his usual fervent scholarship to the assignment, came up with an edition quite different from that heard in most opera-house performances. He opened up standard cuts — Pollione's "Me protegge, me difende" and Norma's "Ah! bello a me ritorna," for instance, both got their second verses. More audaciously, he encouraged his singers to add ornaments throughout, especially at any point when musical material is repeated, even the second stanza of "Casta Diva." (The repeated As at the climax here became a trill.) Not all of the ornamentation was successful. The embellishments to Adalgisa's Act I *preghiera* caused the singer, Keri Alkema, to wander below pitch. But often — as when tenor Emmanuel di Villarosa added a cadenza between the two verses of his cabaletta — they made perfect musical sense, bringing new interest to passages that can be plain as usually performed.

Her one uncertain moment aside, Alkema gave an appealing performance. Trained as a mezzo, she is now billed as a soprano; her smoky lower range sounded mezzo-ish to me, but her top rings out brightly. In the famous duets, her voice blended nicely with Meade's. Di Villarosa had moments of great control and beauty, all of them lower in his range; he tended to lunge wildly, in provincial-tenor fashion, when the line moved above the staff. Daniel Mobbs's Italian may not be that of the Via Alessandro Manzoni, but he brought a truebasso *cantate* approach to Oroveso, singing the role rather than thundering it.

Crutchfield provided loving support for his singers, but other elements of the musical presentation were less than ideal. Recitative passages tended to plod. The Orchestra of St. Luke's sounded atypically scrappy: the strings may have fallen victim to the sultry summer weather. The conductor took full stops to allow for applause at the end of numbers, even the orchestral postlude to Norma's entrance scene — a tactic that kept the opera from achieving its full, moonlit effect. But it did give the audience the chance to cheer the new star in its midst. Under the circumstances, this may have been a necessity. □

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Keri Alkema and Meade
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