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PHOTO RECAP: A Smooth Journey to a Dazzling *Norma*

By Alexandra Zalska
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Keri Alkema and Agela Meade

photo by Gabe Palacio

The 2010 "Bel Canto at Caramoor" series started with a bang, offering two performances of Bellini's masterwork Norma. Alexandra Zalska, who was on hand for the July 16 offering, reports on the work and weighs in on the unique "Caramoor experience."

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The summer is traditionally a dry time for opera here in the NYC area with there being fewer performances per week than during the fall to spring season. We are indeed fortunate that the Caramoor Music Festival in Katonah, NY (a mere hour's journey outside of the city) has their "Bel Canto at Caramoor" program with first class offerings of seldom performed and standard works to tempt opera "fanatics" as well as newcomers to the art form.

Operagoers have rare opportunities to see both established singers in roles they almost never perform as well as newer singers at the start of brilliant careers as well as here the results of scholarly research in the form of score revisions.

THE SETUP

Performances of Bellini's masterwork, *Norma*, are rare enough during any regular opera season. This summer, *Bel Canto at Caramoor* offered two performances of the opera, July 10th and 16th, with the latest sensation, **Angela Meade** in the title role. Aside from the importance of the repertoire offered it is one of the few opportunities to hear this singer locally as she will only be covering *Armida* at the Met this season.

I was one of the unfortunates unable to attend the July 10th performance and paid dearly all week cringing in regret as it seemed the whole city was a buzz of non-stop superlatives everywhere I went. While waiting for a Broadway show to begin one evening I heard a nearby audience member recounting the opera evening in glowing terms to a friend. Just then the Broadway show's flautist began to warm-up with the introduction to "Casta Diva". *Norma* was inescapable! I made it my business to be at the July 16th outing.

THE TRIP

My Caramoor experience started at Grand Central Station a few minutes before the "Caravan" was set to depart. While there is public transportation to the venue (a train to Katonah, NY and five minute cab ride), Caramoor most considerately offers to their opera attendees a direct coach service.

Arriving almost melted on the pavement, parched and fearful of missing the departure I was greeted by an enthusiastic, articulate and just-plain-nice young staffer who immediately put me at ease as she checked me in. She assured me that there would be time to run into the Grand Central Market to get a quick bottle of water as they would wait for those who had yet to arrive due to Friday traffic delays. I was advised not to worry. She would check to make sure they did not leave without me. Small demonstrations of kindness become big and are most appreciated on a sweltering day.

We departed after 15 minutes, comfortable in not a mere bus but a lovely long distance style coach shielded from the heat and impossible noise of the rush hour traffic outside. Had I not looked, I never would have noticed the traffic at all. There was just the cool and comfort inside with the happy chatter of opera lovers and the teasing aroma of someone's hot roast chicken dinner as we made our way to the green of Westchester County.

The warmth and enthusiasm I experienced at the outset never flagged. Upon arrival I was given all necessary information, being guided almost by the hand so that I found my way everywhere with ease. Ticket pick-up was a breeze. There is a cheerful concession stand offering quite lovely sandwiches and beverages. Ushers, rather than merely handing out programs, directed us in a motherly fashion towards our seats. Though we arrived a bit late due to traffic there was still time to enjoy a pre-concert lecture. I felt "set up" in the most positive of ways. Caramoor is not just about the performance but the total experience of generosity of spirit, stunning natural beauty as well as the communal musical event.

THE DELIVERY

Bellini's music in this opera never fails to move, sometimes more than others depending on the gifts of the performers and the conductor on the podium. There has been much heated discussion of singers, their capabilities and how wonderful or terrible they are in these make-or-break roles. I relish the diversity of artists who have done these roles. Each had something unique to offer though some appeal more to my personal taste. My basic requirement is that the drama be given beauty, substance and form. Singers are fundamentally storytellers. The job requires a trained instrument and technique as well as musicality and dramatic vision. Take me to another world. While I notice the technically odd bits and pieces that inevitably show up they are not my main focus.

That being said, this *Norma* left me with my jaw dropped. Thanks to the leadership as of conductor **Will Crutchfield** the drama commenced on the first note. Takeoff!

There was a commitment and unity of purpose on the part of everyone on the stage down to the double bass players who I noticed played with an enthusiasm I have only seen thus far in rock bands. An integral part of the picture is the Orchestra of St. Luke's. The dramatic tension continued through the evening despite the constant and necessary stops for applause and the occasional slight tiring of the artists. Angela Meade was in character from the first moment she stepped foot onstage. Her "Casta Diva" left me breathless and I remained so. There is so much there in so young a Norma. I found all superlatives heard during the previous week to be more than justified. From the comments I heard during the intermission she was even better this week than last, more confident and at greater ease as were the other artists.

Keri Alkema applauded in her recent performances in City Opera's *Don Giovanni* was the innocent and tortured Adalgisa, both vocally and dramatically a wonderful contrast to the enraged and abandoned Norma. The duets of the two women were a joy with their sheer vocal beauty as well as theatricality. **Emmanuel di Villarosa**, despite an ailment, sang Pollione with vocal intelligence, clear dramatic intention and connection to his fellow singers. **Daniel Mobbs** was a fatherly Oroveso further adding to and rounding out the principal's story of political, religious and personal conflict.

Sharin Apostolou turned the Clotilde into more than just a small role giving her shape and a life as a confidante. **Brian Landry** is vocally larger than Flavio yet he played his part with artistry and balance never poking holes in the fabric created by the composer for this role but rather creating a well rounded character in his proper place in the drama. He is one whose further path I will watch with great interest. The chorus is made up of the members of the apprenticeship program, young singers in the early stages of career. All receive the benefit of coaching work with Maestro Crutchfield.

The work was semi-staged with no insignificant movement. Though in concert form I never missed sets or costumes, the space being filled by the dramatic completeness and truth coupled with stunning vocal and musical beauty.

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Donizetti's *Maria di Rohan* is next on the opera calendar. I am running to attend and suggest that anyone with the opportunity do the same. I thank Caramoor, its staff and the artists for this first-rate experience and look forward to this Saturday.

Visit [Caramoor](#) for info and tickets, priced \$20-\$85.

All photos by Gabe Palacio.



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