

THE NEW YORKER

UNQUIET THOUGHTS

Notes on music, by Alex Ross.

JULY 12, 2010

ANGELA MEADE'S NORMA

Posted by [Alex Ross](#)

Andrew Porter, who wrote brilliantly on music for this magazine from 1972 to 1992, said of the title role of Bellini's "Norma": "It calls for power; grace in slow cantilena; pure, fluent coloratura; stamina; tones both tender and violent; force and intensity of verbal declamation; and a commanding stage presence." The young American soprano Angela Meade, who sang Norma on Saturday night in a concert performance at Caramoor and will sing it again on Friday, has most of the qualities that this devilishly difficult role requires. In technical terms, Meade is astounding. She is almost scarily secure at the top of the range—at the end of Act I she let out a blazing high D—and she makes a rich, rounded sound at the lower end. She has exceptional dynamic control, able to move from floating pianissimos to sudden dramatic swells. The coloratura effects—rapid runs, trills, delicate turns, and so on—are handled with uncommon ease. She is a very musical singer, naturally and intelligently riding the phrase. Her tone has a distinct character, slightly darker than the coloratura norm yet warmly glowing. She doesn't seem to make her voice do things; it is doing what it was born to do. As a friend remarked, you relax when you listen to her; you don't worry for the singer, and lose yourself in the music.



The Caramoor audience responded jubilantly from "Casta diva" onward, but some veteran operagoers thought that Meade might be stretching her voice beyond its lyric capacity. Indeed, she sounded a little fatigued toward the end of each very long act. Then again, any Norma is going to have her weak spells as the marathon proceeds. I suspect that Meade possesses reserves of power that may eventually carry her into heavier roles. She might even have pushed her voice a little *more* in dramatic terms—given extra bite to the declamation, exercised greater freedom in the manipulation of the line. Andrew Porter travelled from London to give a pre-concert lecture, and he recounted the four occasions on which he heard Maria Callas sing Norma. Meade does not rival Callas's furious specificity, her moment-to-moment emotionalism. Nor does she yet have the glinting authority of Joan Sutherland or Montserrat Caballé. But she confidently goes her own way, and the prayerful serenity and intimacy that she brings to "Casta diva" or to passages such as "Ei tornerà!" in Act II, have a personal stamp. Certainly, as a first attempt at the complete role, this was a formidable achievement, easily outclassing recent stabs at "Norma" at the Met.

Keri Alkema, a vivid Donna Elvira in New York City Opera's "Don Giovanni" this past season, initially sounded detached and uncertain as Adalgisa, then showed more security and heat as the evening unfolded. Everyone had fun watching the two female leads goad each other on. Daniel Mobbs was a sturdy, focused Orovoso. Emmanuel di Villarosa, the Pollione, experienced unfortunate struggles with his upper register. Will Crutchfield, the director of opera at Caramoor, conducted with his customary attentiveness and musicality, seeming to disappear behind the voices for long stretches. The singers were encouraged to ornament their parts, although they did nothing self-indulgent. Under Crutchfield, Caramoor has become an operatic paradise, limited resources and open-air conditions notwithstanding. A claque of birds to the right of the stage were moved to chirp approvingly when Meade burst into song.