

OPERA NEWS

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Roméo et Juliette, La Bohème, Candide and Rinaldo



Kim and Kuźma at Glimmerglass

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THIS SUMMER'S Glimmerglass Festival, the first under artistic and general director Robert Ainsley, proved very enjoyable. Ainsley's predecessor, Francesca Zambello, had chosen the 2023 Glimmerglass repertory, but in large part Ainsley cast and executed it. The season's two most common repertory titles, *Roméo et Juliette* and *La Bohème*, are both pleasing summer fare and great works, but the other pair of Glimmerglass shows, a *Candide* revival and *Rinaldo*—like *Roméo* a company premiere—made a deeper, genuinely “festival” impression.

Gounod's *Roméo* (seen Aug. 4) is an ambitious undertaking. The staging by new-to-opera Shakespearean director Simon Godwin, with handsome era-spanning costumes by Loren Shaw, didn't solve all of the opera's challenges, but it provided a professional, congenial evening, leaving no doubt that the piece is musically substantive and moving, especially with Joseph Colaneri's sage orchestral pacing. The youthful, attractive and accomplished young leads were Duke Kim and Magdalena Kuz' ma. The tenor gave a fine, lyrical statement of a challenging, sometimes hefty role, with the range, musicianship and stamina already there and only a bit more Gallic float in the tone needed; words were clear if not yet fully inhabited. Kuz' ma, who's done small parts at the Met, showed a memorable timbre and strikingly good technique in both Juliette's coloratura flourishes and the testing “Amour ranime mon courage,” quite thrillingly done, with a knowing sense of phrasing. She and Kim worked together admirably.

Olivier Zerouali's energetic Mercutio supplied the panache and vocal finish his “Mab, la reine des mensonges” ballad demands and rarely gets. Live-wire mezzo Lisa Marie Rogali aced Stéphan's tricky *chanson*, though the visual context for what became the work's central fight scene evoked Miloš Forman's Central Park-set *Hair*. Beyond that, the casting reinforced the difficulty in satisfying the demands French *grand opéra* makes on today's young low-voiced singers. Among the more experienced artists, bass-baritone Stefano de Peppo acted Capulet with aplomb but utterly lacked the secure, rolling bass the part needs. Meredith Arwady took the low-comedy road with a hammy, rake-twirling Gertrude. (What Arwady has to offer in uniquely dusky contralto timbre and unflagging energy paid off far better as *Candide's* Old Lady that evening.) It was perplexing to have a company trustee handsomely embody Lady Capulet, a character pointedly absent from the *Roméo* libretto—as are both Montague parents—at the opening ball and then be absent at her daughter's betrothal and unsummoned at her seeming death. But *Roméo et Juliette* lives and dies with its titular couple, and both Colaneri and Godwin guided Kim and Kuz' ma to a satisfying achievement.



Glimmerglass *Bohème*, with Wang, Burgess, Perrotta, Drone and Blue

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E. LOREN MEEKER'S take on *La Bohème* (seen August 5 matinée) had the virtue of allowing the principals' statements and emotions to be readable throughout, even as the Café Momus scene attained a cheering sense of spectacle, with help from the dancers, the outstanding children's chorus and costume designer Erik Teague. Even with a very young cast, Meeker fared no better than most directors at making the bro-ish antics of the four "bohemians" credible, pushing solid baritone Justin Burgess to overaccentuate Schaunard's every syllable and gesture. The show was awkwardly interlarded with extramusical noises. Directors may think they're enhancing realistic dramatic content, but Act I's exchange of self-introductory arias is not the *Our Town* soda-fountain scene. Operas have precise musical scores that are distorted by added sighs, laughs and group yells—even in a relatively veristic piece, such as *Bohème*. Joshua Blue's affable Rodolfo punctuated his otherwise scrupulous singing—and, worse, that of his colleagues—with nervous giggles, and the effect sounded profoundly unmusical.

In other respects, conductor Nader Abbassi's reading proved admirably balanced and coordinated, though in Act I he drowned out the pleasant-timbred, serious Colline of bass Nan Wang, who later contributed a touching "Vecchia zimarra." Teresa Perrotta

anchored the show vocally and emotionally with her affecting, impressively detailed Mimì. Her duet with Marcello—the dynamic Darren Drone, sounding splendid—and “Sono andati?” brought tears to the eyes of a veteran of scores of *Bohème* performances. Blue, a very fine singer with nice dynamic variety and a secure, exciting top, seems to me more a gift to the Mozart and Britten repertory than to standard Italian roles, but he more than proved his worth here. Emilie Kealani’s light, pretty soprano delivered Musetta’s music with absolute accuracy, even in moments of high vivacity. As Benoit/Alcindoro, de Peppo handily showed his genuine expertise.



I HAD MIDDLING expectations for the revival of Zambello’s 2015 staging of *Candide* (seen Aug. 5 evening), a solid but unincendiary show eight years ago. But this season, a very fine cast—almost universally as good or better vocally, and dramatically more endearing than their 2015 counterparts—upped the game. The show’s choreographer,

Eric Sean Fogel—now fully directing it as well—greatly tightened the staging. His work, both with the daring professional dancers and with their singing colleagues, created an exciting, edgy show. The auto-da-fé scene, for example, managed a truly creepy, almost Brechtian resonance alongside the humorous lyrics. And the whole Eldorado sequence—which many directors and conductors cut—proved quite dazzling visually, a little bit of *Follies* in the jungle.

The strong central trio held the ensemble together. Brian Vu was a remarkably apt and sincere Candide, equally credible when smiling and when mourning. His fine voice still has its previous baritonal color down below, with an appealing if less keenly projected tenor upper range. Katrina Galka's naïve, likable Cunegonde had a bit of soubrettish tremolo in midrange, but her upper-register flights were spectacular. Broadway-trained Bradley Dean made every word of Pangloss/Voltaire tell, and he sang the music with aplomb. One wished that the edition had afforded Rogali's Paquette and Schyler Vargas's campily vain Maximilian more to do. Captain Vanderdendur, usually taken by the tenor who sings the Governor, was sung by soprano Keely Futterer, a rollicking Pirate Queen with spectacular interpolated high notes. In Act II, as in all of the countless versions I've seen, the almost parodically episodic plot loses focus and interest, and that happened here. But Colaneri, Fogel and their forces delivered an invigorating take on an ever-intriguing show.



Costanzo as Rinaldo

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THE WEEKEND ended splendidly on August 6 with Louisa Proske’s brilliantly imagined and executed *Rinaldo* staging, centered on the summer’s artist-in-residence, Anthony Roth Costanzo. The central conceit—that the adventures and battles of the opera’s Tasso-derived plot are the imaginings of a boy hospitalized for cancer, hoping to save himself and his roommate, Almirena—was realized convincingly through meticulous atmospheric and scenic detail. Funny at times, the action also proved deeply moving, and surely relatable to anyone who’s visited (in any sense) a hospital. “Lascia ch’io pianga,” for example, accompanied an MRI endured by Almirena, sung by Jasmine Habersham, physically as convincing a child as Costanzo’s Rinaldo. The toy swords and soldiers Rinaldo is given to play with fueled his fantasies of struggle and victory, which Jorge Cousineau’s superbly calibrated projections displayed through the window of Matt Saunders’s striking hospital set.

Conductor Emily Senturia’s edition cut the characters of Eustazio and the two mermaids, plus a few arias, including the hero’s delightful “È un incendio fra due venti.” But the da capo structures of what remained were respected, and Senturia kept the pace fluid, presiding over some very fine playing with liquid, expressive gestures. The oboe, recorder and harpsichord obbligatos were all excellent; as ever at Glimmerglass, masterful theorbo player Michael Leopold won new fans for his instrument.

Costanzo, who was a striking Nireno in *Giulio Cesare* here fifteen years ago, was wise to undertake this heroic role in this intimate theater, where his fierce dramatic and verbal commitment, fluid movement and command of musical nuance registered even in high-octane numbers such as “Or la tromba.” Costanzo’s phrasing and pinpoint dynamic control in the role’s legato portions, such as the heart-broken “Cara sposa,” made for transfixing listening. He has the genuine Handelian’s ability to vary repeated text with apt ornaments. His gifted but less stylistically attuned colleagues Habersham and Futterer (Armida) went overboard in the repeats.

The cast’s other countertenors, both Glimmerglass Young Artists, demonstrated good Handelian manners and more consistently sounded trills than the sopranos and bass. As Goffredo, Almirena’s father (and the only historical character in the piece), Kyle Sanchez Tingzon showed a lovely, high-placed liquid sound and admirable breath control; as the worried contemporary father in the hospital, he accessed emotional depth. Nicholas Kelliher fielded a more conventional countertenor timbre in the Alfred Deller/Paul Esswood tradition and performed his short role very creditably.

The edge that allows Habersham's voice to ride the orchestra in other repertoire slightly unbalanced the instrumental roundness ideal for Handel, but she did some very attractive singing as Almirena. As the sorceress Armida—a take-charge nurse in Proske's "real life" frame—Futterer looked fabulously evil and dispensed major attitude. Futterer already commands most of the tools for the role, but she needs to achieve more penetrating Italian phrasing; she came closest to the mark in a beautifully limned "Ah! crudel, il pianto mio," which achieved real pathos. But she shows great promise, as does bass Korin Thomas-Smith, a dashing Young Artist from Canada who gave Argante a terrific dramatic profile and an exciting sound. Thomas-Smith's coloratura in the dazzling entrance aria was impressive, but elsewhere his voice showed some unevenness. Proske grasped what few directors do: the Circassian Argante, whatever his erotic attraction for Armida may be, is just as much an outsider in her Damascan world as Rinaldo. Proske and Thomas-Smith showed the warrior (and his contemporary-surgeon parallel) as a practicing Muslim; Armida, with her demonish familiars, seemed purely a creature of sensuality and whim.

This *Rinaldo*, the best-sold of the weekend's four shows, affirmed once again that there's a public that will travel for Baroque opera; the only downside was that just five performances were scheduled. One hopes Proske's staging will be seen elsewhere.

One of the pleasures of Glimmerglass is hearing a YA do a small part that betokens a bright professional future. Besides those already mentioned, this summer's crop included baritone Jonathan Patton, who nearly blew the theater's roof off with *Candide's* bitter "Words, Words, Words" (written for 1971's tour production); Jonathan Pierce Rhodes, an engaging Cacambo with a stellar music-theater tenor; and Zachary Rioux as that rare bird, a mellifluous Parpignol. — *David Shengold*