

Mozart in Mallorca

So let's be honest, when it comes to opera would Mallorca of all places be on anyone's radar? Here droves of tourists surge through overcrowded historical villages, unruly crowds quaff sangria from 10-litre buckets on the Ballermann stretch and the property prices are shooting to dizzying heights. At least these are the generally accepted prejudices against the dearest island of the Teutons. Culture, and especially a supposedly elitist genre like opera, ought to play a pretty subordinate role as far as the largest of the Balearic Islands is concerned.

And yet the island has just been the scene of a memorable production of Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart's opera 'Le Nozze di Figaro'. This may seem like no record-breaking feat since the composer and his works remain part of the standard repertoire of all opera houses. However what made this performance so special was the fact that it was anything but standard. In the unadorned concrete auditorium in a multi-million dollar location right on the port of Palma, the Italian conductor Giuliana Retali conducted a performance of the opera which many great and established German opera houses could learn from, indeed, learn a lot from.

The remarkable thing about it was that almost all the musicians who participated in the project were from the island, whether the members of the Camerata Mallorquina or the choir, and only the soloists were flown in. Retali has been working with the orchestra for several years, transforming it from a jumbled bunch of freelance musicians into a highly homogenous orchestra with an excellent, well-balanced ensemble sound. Above all it has enabled the orchestra members to focus on a single goal: embracing the cause of opera as part of a 'Gesamtkunstwerk' (all-encompassing piece of art), supporting the singers whilst maintaining awareness of their own importance. Retali has already put this thesis into practice in exemplary fashion with several concertante projects. Mozart's Figaro was now the first completely staged

project using this concept, dubbed "Opera 4.0". This has a revolutionary ring to it, especially since Retali explicitly evokes previous operatic "revolutions" brought about by Monteverdi, Gluck and Verdi.

Fundamentally Retali's project is quite simply a return to the essentials, to the vital elements of drama and language, which the music is also in the service of. "Singers, especially soloists, must strive to grasp the meaning of what they are singing, so that in understanding and in integrating it for themselves, they can in turn better enable the audience to understand it." One could not illustrate it better today than Ottavio Durante described it back in 1608 in the preface to his 'Arie devote'. Retali has rekindled attention to linguistic and vocal qualities, which have been increasingly submerged in these times of huge opera houses, increasingly vast orchestras and vanity of singers. This and also the fact that the performance in the Palma Auditorium was in every respect musically a huge delight, these are Retali's true merits. Truly no small merit given that we live in times where star casts are often considered more important than musical quality.

Deda Christina Colonna's staging was limited to the necessities. Except for a few beach chairs, umbrellas and an armchair the stage was empty. But this was enough to evoke all the essentials and to clarify the space and the spatial relationships. The scenery was created by large-format projections, mostly nature photographs of Mallorca, which gave the performance a local touch, and occasional short films. The costumes were subtly historical, but avoiding too much authentic detail. Nothing was lacking despite the fact that it was overall a very economical production, because every detail was thoughtfully administered and attention was focused on the real thing: the story.

This was narrated by the singers with extraordinary vividness. It was acted in pithy and charming fashion, displaying ample instinct for situational comedy and depicting effectively, but never insincerely, the comical and delicate situations within a dramaturgically fuelled atmosphere. All this was

wonderfully coherent in Deda Christina Colonna's production. Another important factor was the musical component, because the performance in the singer-friendly acoustic of the Palma Auditorium was excellent in every respect.

There were many outstanding vocal performances, for example Fabio Capitanucci, who as the count, had a truly extraordinary stage presence, and both vocally and theatrically implemented Retali's concept in an ideal manner with his incredibly precise diction. Paola Gardina portrayed Cherubino with vocal and theatrical brilliance. Also Gianluca Pasolini as Don Basilio/Don Curzio with his exceptionally versatile voice, Alessandro Luongo both virile and roguish as Figaro and Maya Boog (Contessa), Juanita Lascarro (Susanna), Valentina Pennino (Barbarina), Nicolò Bartoli (Antonio), Agata Bienkowska (Marcellina) and Pablo López (Bartolo) formed an overall first-class and highly enthusiastic ensemble.

Also the excellent sounding choir Aquatreveus from Artà, a youth choir that was standing for the first time ever on the opera stage, proved to be the perfect choice. Everything went well together, both musically and scenically. No matter whether you call it Opera 4.0 or revolution, when opera is created with such passion, brilliance and coherence, when music, staging and acting go hand in hand to this extent - and on an excellent professional level - it is simply sensational. What a pity that this production was for the moment only a one-off: more performances are absolutely called for!