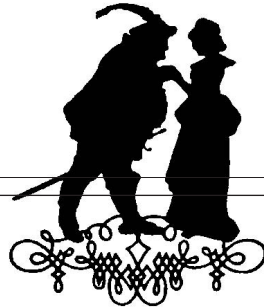


Opera con Brio

Richard B. Beams



A Vivid Display of Virtuosity

Mozart's *Mitridate* at Boston Lyric Opera

In mid-September, the increasingly adventurous Boston Lyric Opera unearthed Mozart's *Mitridate*, a rarely performed early opera seria as the opening production of its 2024 season. It was a splendid occasion, with a splendid cast at the intimate Emerson Cutler Majestic Theatre, perhaps coming close musically to that of its first production in 1770 at Milan's Regio Ducal Teatro (the predecessor of La Scala). The performance acquainted an enthusiastic audience with the extraordinary 14-year-old composer's third opera, his first for a major company. Although updating the production caused it to fall short on authenticity, the production did showcase in a 21st century guise what an 18th century audience looked for in an opera - a convoluted story and a dazzling display of virtuosity.

And display there was aplenty, right from the opening aria by versatile American soprano Brenda Rae as Mitridate's betrothed, Aspasia, soaring through coloratura flights with extraordinary ease and energy. This exciting opening aria, written originally for the *prima donna* of the day was followed immediately by

an equally challenging aria, a three-part sonata-allegro, written for the Sifare, the soprano castrato or *primo uomo* of the day, sung with equal élan by energized soprano Vanessa Goikoetxea. Today, this would commonly be a so-called "trouser role" for Sifare, who competes with his older brother Farnace for the affection of Aspasia; but in this production, with a nod to the contemporary, Sifare is Farnace's sister.

To my mind, this was an unnecessary deviation, plausible, but pointless. However, this did not affect the singing - nor, really, the plot, built loosely around the historical Mithridates VI, the King of Pontus, a Hellenic kingdom on the southern shores of the Black Sea. Before the opera he leaves his young betrothed, the Greek princess Aspasia, in the care of his two sons (oops...son and daughter) to go to war against the Romans, and then sends a false report of his death to test their loyalty. The plot thickens, but the essence of it is made clear from the outset, with the two opening arias - Aspasia bereft and conflicted because she loves Sifare, and Sifare, lovestruck with the beauty of her father's fiancé.



Brenda Rae (Aspasia); Vanessa Goikoetxea (Sifare) Photo: Nile Scott Studios

And throughout the opera they made a striking pair both vocally and visually, Aspasia in an elegant blue gown with diaphanous veil, Sifare in a stylish black pants suit (both thanks to talented Costume Designer Molly Irelan). BLO's judicious cuts of recitative somewhat shortened the three-act opera, which the BLO performed in two parts with highlights being some of the young Mozart's best music. These included the pair of arias that close the first part. First, as Sifare bids farewell to Aspasia, came her resigned "Lungi da te, mio bene" with a mournful horn obbligato over an undulating accompaniment and a depth of expression that anticipated *Così fan tutte*. Following immediately came the forlorn Aspasia's equally expressive adagio aria with its contrasting middle section, "Nel grave tormento."

Aspasia's torment at the parting was reinforced by her slow, labored tug at a blue veil which she stretched across the bare stage. The ploy of fabric stretched from the side, sometimes a colorful ribbon for a performer to self-entangle or to entrap another, was perhaps overused at times with bound victims cluttering the stage, but it was most effective in this case. Later in Part Two the unhappy lovers sing beautifully the overlapping thirds and mellifluous runs of the opera's only duet. With the pair isolated at stage center in a haze of blue light, the scene made indeed for a Tristanesque close to what was originally Mozart's second act.

Indeed, throughout the opera, the varied and striking lighting effects from Lighting Designer Pablo Santiago were an effective contribution to the stylized production, as were the mostly effective projections by Projection Designer Hana Kim on the expansive white curved wall at the back of the spare set by Adam Rigg. Although distracting during the overture, such projections like that of a skull, soon to materialize, helped clarify the opening scene and set up the first two arias without the omitted expository recitative.

Just as effectively cast as the primary couple was the secondary pair, Farnace (initially like Sifare, a soprano castrato) and the visiting Greek princess Ismene, his promised bride. The renowned countertenor John Holiday as Farnace was just as impressive with his rich voice as when I first heard him at the Juillard School some ten years ago in the title role of Handel's *Radamisto*. And the sprightly soprano Angela Yam was captivating as Ismene, returning to Boston Lyric Opera this year as an Emerging Artist. Keeping the vivid color scheme going, the manipulative Farnace was cast in deep red, while the buoyant young Ismene wore an elegant gown of brilliant yellow.



Brenda Rae (Aspasia)

Photo: Nile Scott Studios



Bathed in pink light: Angela Yam (Ismene); Alexis Peart (Arbate); and John Holiday (Farnace)
Photo: Nile Scott Studios

And vocally both were as vibrant as the colors they wore - Farnace right from his bravura gambit to Ismene early on, warning her to beware, then in his taut confession of treachery to Mitridate midway, and finally expressing his remorse and change of heart in the penultimate number of the score. As for Ms. Yam, she dazzled indeed, not only in dress, but in both vocal and stage acrobatics. She added a flippant tongue-in-cheek playfulness to the opera, atypical in authentic opera seria, more in keeping with Mozart's well known *dramma giocoso* to follow in a few years. I should add that a kind of playful banter (like a back and forth of fisty cuffs at one point) between Farnace and his sister was also front and center. This perhaps helped to make the somber opera seria more palatable to a contemporary audience, but it seemed out of character with the intense rivalry of the two siblings in the libretto.

But there was nothing either comic or playful about the titular role of Mitridate as sung by the foremost bel canto tenor of the day Lawrence Brownlee, admired worldwide as a virtuosic Rossini specialist, in performances I have been fortunate to hear often. And the role of Mitridate is as daunting as any Rossini ever wrote, which is perhaps why Brownlee suggested this opera for the BLO. His entrance, prepared by a

stately orchestral march during which all characters line up to greet the king, up to this point presumed dead, was simply spellbinding. In this Cavata (short arioso), he confirmed how although not victorious he came home without disgrace. With bravura and apparent ease he threw off the treacherous leaps and difficult scale passages of this arioso requiring a two-octave range. The rapt audience then exploded with prolonged applause and bravos. Reports from the premiere are that Mozart had to rewrite this aria some five times for the fussy tenor Guglielmo d'Ettore. No need for that with Mr. Brownlee - he could have handled anything given him. Similar precipitous leaps and virtuosity followed later as well, in "Quel ribelle e quell'ingrato," another short aria, this time a tirade against his ungrateful son Farnace.



Lawrence Brownlee (Mitridate)

Photo: Nile Scott Studios

Although cutting back on some of the sprawling recitative, the production happily did include the single arias of two other fine singers: the statuesque mezzo Alexis Peart (an Emerging Artist with the BLO) as Arbate, advisor to Mitridate, acting as mediator in the first scene between the King's two children; and seasoned tenor Charles Sy as Marzio, the Roman tribune at opera's end advising Farnace to be steadfast in his traitorous endeavors to side with Rome.

The rebellious Farnace relents, however, giving up his treachery and expressing his remorse in his final aria, another highlight of the opera. But he expresses his remorse immediately after he has run his sword clear through his father, killing him right on stage quite unrealistically. Here, in my mind, Director James Darrah missteps, straying too far from the 18th century aesthetic of no deaths on stage. Additionally, the contrast of Farnace's remorse right on the heels of this on-stage stabbing was just too severe, and seemingly out of keeping with the flavor of the production as a whole. In the libretto, the mortally wounded Mitridate is carried out on stage after Farnace's remorseful aria so that there is space between the killing and Farnace's expression of regret. Meanwhile the final projections in the background didn't really clarify that in the distance, at Farnace's bidding, the Roman fleet was burning.

Still, although the production's end was more muddle than magic, and although stage antics occasionally distracted, the stylized production and lighting at least created a momentum that helped the young Mozart's score come to life as a steady display of musical virtuosity. And this in turn helped bring forward what stood out most in the captivating evening: the outstanding artistry of the fine cast of seven who presented such compelling evidence of Mozart's potential, and genius, in learning to write for both the voice and the stage.



Lawrence Brownlee (Mitridate); Angela Yam (Ísmene); Brenda Rae (Aspasia); John Holiday (Farnace); Vanessa Goikoetxea (Sifare); Alexis Peart (Arbate)

Photo: Nile Scott Studios