

Wednesday, March 25, 2015

## Barge of slow ravishment

'Xerxes' brings delicate Baroque opera to MSU

by Lawrence Cosentino



It's a heady week for music wins. For the first time in MSU Opera Theatre's history, director Melanie Helton is going all the way to the back of the cellar and uncorking the really good stuff — from 1738.

Baroque opera is about 30 years into a worldwide resurgence at places like Cooperstown's Glimmerglass Festival. Finally, the barge of slow ravishment is penetrating the wilds of the Red Cedar River in the form of George Frederic Handel's "Xerxes," the "Messiah" composer's last operatic masterpiece.

Incredibly, after decades of nothing, mid-Michigan connoisseurs are getting a chance that will almost surely never come again: a Baroque opera crawl. By coincidence, the University of Michigan School of Music is performing Handel's magnum opus, "Julius Caesar," the same weekend.

"Thirty years ago, this would have been unheard of," MSU guest conductor Daniel Beckwith said.

But beware. After a pure draught of Handel arias, cruder brews like "Carmen" and "La Bohème" may henceforth taste like ripple.

"The music is so vital, so rhythmic," Beckwith said. "It has drive — and beautiful tunes. Not that Puccini or Massenet doesn't have them, but this music goes deep to the core of one's soul."

One of the world's top baroque opera conductors, Beckwith cut his teeth with no less a mentor than Metropolitan Opera conductor James Levine for six years, until Levine gave him his first maestro gig with Mozart's "Don Giovanni" at the Met in 1995. Since then, Beckwith has conducted all over the world and conquered the entire Baroque repertoire.

Helton's decision to mount the first pre-Mozart opera in the program's history was prompted partly by the chance to snag Beckwith, a friend since 1982, and partly by this year's bumper crop of mezzo-sopranos.

Listeners will enter a delicate new sonic world. Beckwith will conduct from a harpsichord, and the light orchestral texture will be graced by period touches like recorders (rustic flutes) and a theorbo (a deeply resonant Baroque lute). There are no show-stoppers from Puccini's playbook. The entire opera has only two duets and no ensembles. Vibrato is used sparingly; bowing is right out.

"Not everything is a ball-buster, Helton said.

"You don't always have to sing full tilt," Beckwith genteelly agreed. "It's so much more than the notes. It's the inner expression of the lines."

Helton found the gimmicks and "bits" suggested by many opera arias useless when painting so subtle a canvas. Even the stage lighting is a delicate wash. "The music is so pure, it doesn't stand tricking it up," she said. "You're mesmerized by the sound of the voice and these beautiful melodies."

Schylar Sheltroun, a mezzo-soprano and first-year Master's student, said the experience is "very different" from the other operas she's sung.

"It's a lot more textured," Sheltroun said. "It's constantly running, like running water. It takes a lot of control. You have to concentrate to keep a gorgeous sound throughout the phrase."

Beckwith worked with the MSU cast for three weeks in January and returned two weeks ago for the run-up to curtain time.

"I find it a joy to share my love of this repertoire with young singers," he said. "It's all new to them."

The same goes for the orchestra. Beckwith schooled the pit musicians in a variety of baroque-era practices, paying special attention to the bowing hands of the string players. "How much weight they use, the speed of the bow, it all gives a different clarity or brilliance to the sound," Beckwith said. "It's a whole new sonic world for the orchestra, too."

Helton said this weekend's Spartan-Wolverine Handel smackdown wasn't planned. She attributes the advent of "Julius Caesar" in Ann Arbor to another Baroque maven, U of M's new vocal coach and conductor, Kathleen Kelly (who used to sublet Helton's New York apartment when Kelly sang at the Met).

Helton plans to sneak off to Ann Arbor to catch "Julius Caesar" on Thursday, when "Xerxes" has the day off at MSU — but not to steal any ideas. MSU's "Xerxes" is in period dress, while the smart-alecky U of M "Caesar" transposes the action to — ahem — a contemporary art museum.

Wonder where they got that idea?

**"Xerxes"**

MSU Opera Theatre 7:30 p.m. Wednesday, March 25; 8 p.m. Friday, March 27 & Saturday March 28; 3 p.m. Sunday, March 29 \$20/\$18 seniors/\$5 students Fairchild Theatre 542 Auditorium Road, East Lansing (517) 353-5340, music.msu.edu

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