Jommelli - L'Isola Disabitata (2015)



1. L'Isola Disabitata 1:18:09 Costanza - Raffaella Milanesi Enrico - Davide Luciano Gernando - Alessandro Scotto di Luzio Silvia - Silvia Frigato Matilde Serao - Antonella Morea Orchestra of San Carlo Theatre Rinaldo Alessandrini - conductor

L’isola disabitata (The Desert island) is part of the tribute Teatro di San Carlo is paying to its illustrious past: the recovery of the great Neapolitan tradition represents one of the leitmotifs of the house’s recent seasons, which saw a series of successful productions of operas by Domenico Cimarosa, Domenico Sarro and Niccolò Jommelli. The occasion of this production was also the 300th birthday of Niccolò Jommelli (he was born in Aversa, not far from Naples in 1714, the same year as Gluck).

Jommelli was Kapellmeister to the Duke of Württemberg at Stuttgart, where he wrote this and other operas, including L’Olimpiade and Fetonte, in which he introduced a free use of accompanied recitative and broke with the tradition of the da capo aria, thus anticipating Gluck. In his time, Jommelli was as celebrated and important a composer as the German opera reformer, and at the apex of his career, was one of the best paid and influential composers in all Europe, whose orchestral writing in opera influenced the Mannheim Symphonists. The reasons for his neglect in the the late 19th and 20th centuries have nothing to do with his ability as an opera composer, as at the time Rossini was working in Naples for the Teatro San Carlo, some of Jommelli's operas were regarded as gems.

L’isola disabitata is quite a rarity: composed in 1761 to a libretto by Pietro Metastasio also set in music by Haydn, this is the first time it has been presented in Naples. The plot concerns Costanza, abandoned (or so she believes) by her husband Gernando on a desert island, along with her sister, Silvia. Gernando and his friend, Enrico, have in fact been taken by pirates, and

only after 13 years they managed to escape. Back to the island, Gernando hopes to find Costanza and Silvia still alive, but he discovers an inscription in a rock which leads him to think Costanza is dead: however, at the end disaster is averted and a happy ending ensues, as Costanza and Gernando are reunited, and Enrico and Silvia fall in love.

The island that director Mariano Bauduin imagines is a graveyard with tomb sculptures and the mute presence of a young couple who represent, according to the stage directions, Orpheus and Eurydice. He also (and incongruously) adds to the cast the presence of Matilde Serao, a famous Neapolitan female journalist and writer in the late 19th century, who has the task of telling the background story. Even more, one of most famous historical buildings in Naples – the Palazzo Donna Anna – is pictured on a backdrop, as it is chosen as a metaphor of the history of Naples, where “everything always seems on the verge of collapse and, instead, rises again”. It was too much for a poor, unpretentious Baroque libretto. The director’s attempt to fill the text with more ideas than it can bear caused an overload of confused suggestions.

The original cast being meant for all castrati, the opera was performed here by two sopranos, a tenor and a baritone. These changes, of course necessary, may have contributed to make a very clear and balanced score, preserving in some way the dramatic grandeur of Jommelli, mainly evident in the three great lamenting arias.

The production boasts very beautiful costumes (Marianna Carbone) and the scenes (Dario Gessati), with very convincing performances by the singers. Soprano Raffaella Milanesi (Costanza) has been working on the rediscovery of operas from the 18th century, like Salieri’s La grotta di Trofonio, Martin y Soler’s La capricciosa corretta and Traetta’s Antigona. She lent Costanza her vocal elegance and virtuosity, her dark soprano being particularly fit for this opera. Silvia Frigato is also a specialist in Baroque repertoire. Her lyric soprano voice is perfect for Silvia’s role, which, although not particularly demanding, still requires quite a bit of technique combined with sustained legatos.

Baritone Davide Luciano was a masterful Gernando. Luciano sang with a warm, resounding voice and a real compassion for his (supposed) loss, showing a beautiful control of his dark-toned and rich voice, although perhaps with not enough agility. In recitatives, he displayed his understanding of Baroque operatic style, with good musicianship, expressiveness and clarity of text. Alessandro Scotto di Luzio as Enrico had genuine vocal chemistry with Silvia. He was most remarkable for his suitability for the role, as he captured the emotional sentiment of each aria well, along with delicacy and style.

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