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Review

'Semele' dazzles with humor, technique and beauty

By Tom Strini, Journal Sentinel
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To all who packed the Pabst Theater on Friday night for the Florentine Opera's "Semele" and left glowing with delight and buzzing with excitement: Resist the temptation to reveal what happened in John La Bouchardiere's endlessly inventive production of Handel's 1743 opera/oratorio. Don't give away the grand surprise or any of the many small surprises. Don't spoil the fun for those who might attend Sunday.

That still leaves you with plenty of music to discuss, in delicious detail. "Semele" is a very great piece of music, crackling with urgently expressive, tenderly reassuring, comically wrathful and virtuosic melody for principals and chorus alike.

The singers commanded the music from a place high enough to allow them to focus, first, on the emotional shadings rather than the thousands of notes and, second, on stylish acting and nuanced comedy. This is comedy of the raised eyebrow, the curled lip, the killing glance, and it gets funnier and funnier as you become attuned to its subtlety.

Soprano Jennifer Aylmer plays Semele, the mortal girl whose vanity grows beyond all bounds when the mighty Jove takes her as a mistress. Aylmer's coloratura sounds at first as natural and easy as giggling, as she takes thrilled pleasure in Jove's attentions and her posh heavenly apartment. But she wants more, and when she sings at Jove to get it, her phrases and rhythms turn pointed and her sound even more brilliant.

Both Aylmer and mezzo Sandra Piques Eddy, in the dual roles of Ino and the jealous goddess Juno, were spectacular. Piques Eddy has a rich, dark, weighty voice that makes her vocal agility all the more astonishing. She showed a special gift for working comedy into her singing, with little tricks of emphasis and timing that drive home punch lines. She also is a sly physical comedienne; she never overdid anything but got all the biggest laughs of the night.

Tenor Robert Breault's Jove is a smooth operator, in the way he sings and the way he moves. His rendition of the lyric aria "Wherever You Walk" would melt any woman's heart.

A supporting cast comprising Jason Abrams, Jason Hardy, Greer Davis-Brown, Rafael Luquis and dancer Katie Sopoci were perfect. Conductor Jane Glover drew a bracing, clear sound from the Milwaukee Symphony Orchestra, enforced well-chosen tempos and expressive dynamics, and supported the singers at every turn.

The Florentine Opera Chorus - 20 voices for this show - sang, danced and acted with a level of skill, confidence and naturalness I never imagined possible. Scott Stewart's chorus is a big part of "Semele," the best Florentine show I've seen in 26 years of watching.

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