

lacks much dramatic frisson, but is worth staging just to savor such vocal marvels as “Parto, parto” and “Non più di fiori” in their original operatic context.

There was a lot of stand-and-sing in this *Clemenza* since director Chas Radler-Shieber paid due obeisance throughout to *Clemenza*’s opera seria roots. The smooth lines and sparse elegance of David Zinn’s essentially unadorned set complemented this approach, enabling the singers to appear in strong relief against it and making the sudden bursts of color in the chorus’s costumes that much more effective in comparison.

With relatively little distracting stage movement, audience interest remained focused intently on the singing. Vitellia, sung with passionate if occasionally strident intensity by Wendy Nielsen, fuels what little plot there is in her obsessive quest for the affections of the Emperor Tito, sung with regal dignity and generosity of sound by tenor John Tessier. Kristina Szabó, in the trouser role of Sesto, was a paragon of virtuosity and tasteful restraint. Smaller roles and the chorus were all exemplary—with Kathleen Brett’s portrayal of Servilia, Sesto’s sister, a particularly gleaming gem. —Robert Jordan

A surprise was in store for those who made up the standing-room-only audience at Vancouver’s Canadian Memorial Church on Jan. 8 for a concert performance of *Carmen*, mounted by the new **Vancouver Concert Opera Co-Operative**. With vigorous and focused piano accompaniment by Kinza Tyrrell, the performance proved riveting, passionate, poignant and totally satisfying.

Tenor Frederick Robert, filling in for an indisposed colleague on two days notice, displayed a vibrant tenor as Don José, his characterization well controlled, beautifully articulated and sensitively acted. Mezzo Natalie Burdeny, also VCOC Artistic Director, showed an enviable understanding of the title role in her portrayal of the nuanced vagaries of *Carmen*’s personality. Her Card Scene was particularly memorable for the way she projected the darkness of her fate against the nicely conveyed frivolity of sopranos

Kathleen Morrison (Frasquita) and Jeanine Fynn (Mercédès). The delicate and pure soprano of Arianna Sovernigo made for an exquisitely sung Micaëla, while baritone Andrew Greenwood, making his entrance striding down the centre aisle of the church, brought his past experience as Escamillo to create an assured portrayal that mesmerized the audience. Chorus members voiced most of the comprimario roles with gusto and panache, including bass-baritone Max van Wyck (Zuniga), baritone Ed Moran (Moralès), tenor Paul Just (Le Remendado) and tenor Ed Moran (Le Dancaïre). Kudos to VCOC for a presentation of this caliber, rewarded by an audience that came to its feet with cheers at the conclusion. —HC

VICTORIA

Who knew a countertenor could be sexy? That was the biggest shock of opening night (Nov. 11) at **Pacific Opera Victoria**’s production of Handel’s *Rodelinda*. The other was how well the members of the orchestra handled the demands of making this a “historically informed performance.”

But back to sexy. American countertenor Gerald Thompson—the only non-Canadian in the cast—brought not only a startlingly lovely and full voice with a fabulous top to the role of Bertarido, the exiled King of Lombardy, but also a manly and virile presence. You believed both his longing for his wife, Rodelinda, and his ability to take out the bad guy when required. And when he and Rodelinda (soprano Nathalie Paulin) sang the opera’s only duet, “Io t’abbraccio,” you could feel the temperature rise.

Thompson’s chemistry with Paulin was palpable, and they were perfectly matched in both their physical grace and vocal skill. Paulin made Handel’s rapid ornamentation seem effortless and entirely natural. She was a born queen, but also the opera’s true he-

ro—remaining loyal to her husband even when she thinks he is dead, protecting her honor by literally biting the hand of Grimoaldo (tenor Benjamin Butterfield), usurper to the throne. Butterfield, along with bass Bruce Kelly (second villain Garibaldo), mezzo Megan Latham (Grimoaldo’s spurned fiancée, Eduige) and countertenor Matthew White (Bertarido’s friend, Unolfo) all had their moments of greatness in this production, but only White seemed to inhabit the music as easily and commandingly as Paulin and Thompson.

Unfortunately, Oriol Tomas, directing professional opera for the first time, didn’t help these secondary players. He seemed unable to trust the singers and the music to carry the story, adding far too many head-scratching details—just what was that hairy staff in Eduige’s hand?—and couldn’t quite figure how to change scenes without stopping the action dead.

Nancy Bryant’s set—a dark, angular, two-level structure with a tilting bridge running from side to side—felt appropriately 7th century, but it never changed (only a few basic props were moved in and out) and became rather boring by the end.

The orchestra, however, was terrific.



Benjamin Butterfield (Grimoaldo) and Nathalie Paulin in the title role of Pacific Opera Victoria’s *Rodelinda*

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