

Brünnhilde. Simon O'Neill's rather reedy tenor is not the dark, hefty instrument usually assigned to the older Siegfried, but the ease and thrilling ring of his high notes were welcome, and he played the guileless hero with elan. Andrea Silvestrelli's craggy, booming bass and hulking deportment made him an exemplary Hagen, and Ryan McKinny was a resonant Gunther. Some double casting resulted in solid singing from Jamie Barton (Waltraute and Second Norn) and the HGO debutante Heidi Melton (Gutrune and Third Norn), while Meredith Arwady's baritone chest register anchored the trio of rope-weavers. Christopher Purves was a handsome-voiced and insinuating Alberich, and Andrea Carroll, Catherine Martin and Renée Tatum sang prettily as Woglinde, Wellgunde and Flosshilde.

The revival of *Entführung* had previously been seen here in 2002 and 2008; it places the action aboard the Orient Express heading from Paris to Istanbul in the 1920s. Thomas Rösner conducted with sparkle and verve, and James Robinson again provided fizzy direction.

Albina Shagimuratova's soprano was effulgent in the middle but weak at the bottom, and her tone could have used more point, but she sang Constanze's challenging arias with vigour. The most accurate and fluent coloratura of the performance was found in Lawrence Brownlee's ardent rendition of Belmonte's showpieces. Ryan Speedo Green made a role and HGO debut with a resounding, physically commanding Osmin, Chris Bozeka brought a clear sound and bright high notes to Pedrillo's music, Uliana Alexyuk made a sprightly and ripe-toned Blonde, and Christopher Purves was a well-spoken and elegantly acted Pasha Selim.

Little Women, Mark Adamo's operatic version of Louisa May Alcott's beloved 1868 novel, has been performed all over the world since the HGO Studio commissioned it and mounted a small-scale production in 1998. Seen on April 2 in the LAMBERT HALL, the staging by Dashiell Waterbury captured the charm of the classic family drama. The attractive sets, costumes and lighting were furnished by Jodi Bobrovsky, Clairemarie Verheyen and Jim Elliott, and the strong ensemble cast was tidily supported by the 21-member orchestra under OH's artistic director and principal conductor, Eiki Isomura.

Monica Isomura gave handsome voice to Jo March's longing for things to stay as they are, and her fellow mezzo Jennifer Crippen euphoniously embodied the era's image of domesticity as sister Meg. The sopranos Julie Hoeltzel and Leigh Whitney Rosh sang enjoyably as shy, doomed Beth and artistic, headstrong Amy, while the mezzo Laura Coale was bracingly haughty as wealthy Aunt Cecilia. The capable male contingent was headed by the tenor Alexander Scheuermann as Laurie, Matt Moeller as Meg's husband-to-be John Brooke, and fellow baritone Nate Mattingly as Jo's future husband Friedrich Bhaer. His recitation of Goethe's 'Kennst du das Land' is the most lyrically beautiful moment in the opera, and Mattingly sang it eloquently.

WILLIAM ALBRIGHT

Katonah

Will Crutchfield's BEL CANTO AT CARAMOOR series celebrated its 20th anniversary this summer in what also turned out to be its farewell season. Crutchfield marked both events with a gala opening night concert on June 17 and a concert version of Bellini's *Il pirata* on July 8. The soprano Angela Meade and tenor Santiago Ballerini featured in both, the two singers having received early career boosts from Crutchfield at Caramoor: the soprano will sing the title roles of *Semiramide* and *Norma* next season at the Metropolitan

Opera, roles she first sang with Crutchfield at Caramoor; the Argentinian tenor made his American debut as Fernand in Caramoor's *La Favorite* in 2015.

Meade explored spinto-dramatic repertoire at the gala, revealing greater dramatic temperament and a growing voice poised to take on new challenges. She began with a passionately phrased but occasionally gusty 'Pace, pace mio Dio' from *La forza del destino*. She followed that with a warm-toned, feminine reading of Isolde's Liebestod, but her best work of the evening was 'Ebben, ne andrò lontano' from *La Wally*. In all three Meade surprised listeners with her wide dynamic range and uninhibited use of chest tone.

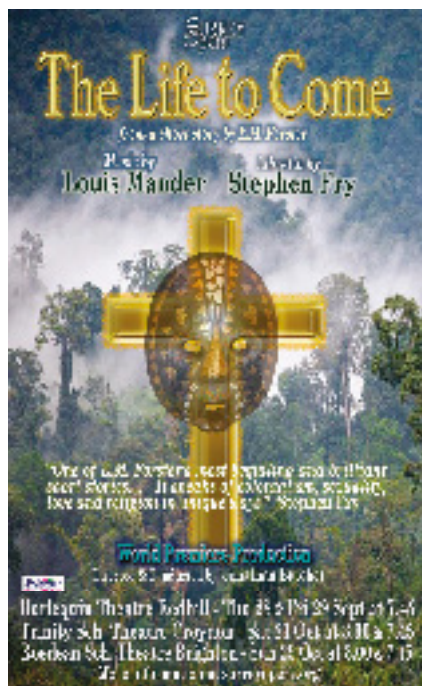
Two years after his promising but tentative Caramoor debut, Ballerini sang as his first concert selection a technically secure, soaring account of Arturo's cavatina 'A te, o cara' from *I puritani*, capped with heady but firm high Cs. He returned with nine more brilliant high Cs in 'Pour mon âme' from *La Fille du régiment*. Elegantly sculpted legato phrasing marked his contribution to the duet 'Bagnato dalle lagrime' from *Il pirata*, partnering the bright-voiced JoAna Rusche. Arias from *Die Zauberflöte* and Thomas's *Le Caïd*, and overtures, choruses and ensembles from *Lucia di Lammermoor*, *Guillaume Tell*, *Cavalleria rusticana* and *Nabucco* rounded out the concert, deftly handled by the Caramoor Bel Canto Young Artists, Crutchfield and the Orchestra of St Luke's.

The rousing, rapturously received concert of Bellini's 1827 breakthrough opera showcased Meade's commanding, dramatically engaged Imogene, equally matched with Ballerini's ardent, stylish and dashing Gualtiero. Meade's large, flexible soprano extends up to easy high Ds. Meade has admitted Caballé's influence, yet her pianissimos often sound like a disconnected trick falsetto requiring a break in the vocal line. Everything came together thrillingly in Imogene's mad scene, 'Col sorriso d'innocenza ... Oh sole, ti vela!'. Meade sang the cavatina with lush, fine-spun tone. In the cabaletta she tore into high notes and low notes with exciting abandon, scrupulously polishing each note of the wide-ranging scales.

Slim and handsome, Ballerini sings wonderfully on the breath applying expressive light and shade to Bellini's musical line. A little more control over *mezza voce* singing is needed. His upper register is easy and sweet, sailing effortlessly up to Gualtiero's many top notes. The bass Harold Wilson sang the baritone role of Imogene's unloved husband and Gualtiero's arch enemy Ernesto with imposing tonal thrust and confidence up to a rock-solid high F. The Caramoor Bel Canto Young Artists exhibited polished professionalism in the comprimario and

■ Farewell to Caramoor's Venetian Theater: Santiago Ballerini and Angela Meade in 'Il pirata'





chorus parts. Crutchfield and the Orchestra of St Luke's presided over a vibrant orchestral interpretation masterfully using rhythm and colour to point up the drama and pulling the listener through the duller passages in this early Bellini score.

In July 2018 Crutchfield will inaugurate Teatro Nuovo, a nine-day festival at SUNY Purchase College featuring semi-staged performances of Mayr's *Medea in Corinto* and Rossini's *Tancredi*. ELI JACOBSON

Miami

Un ballo in maschera is an opera about betrayal. It is also one of the most melodious of Verdi's operas, and the combination of a tragic theme and strong complement of principals made the FLORIDA GRAND OPERA production (seen on April 29 at the ARSHT CENTER) an often riveting experience. Everything came together at the heart of the opera, the Act 2 midnight assignation in a graveyard between Gustavo (Rafael

Davila) and the woman he secretly desires, Amelia (Tamara Wilson), wife of the king's secretary and trusted confidant, Count Anckarström (Todd Thomas). Gustavo and Amelia's duet was rapturous, especially Wilson's heart-stopping rendition of the aria 'Ma dall'arido stelo divulsa', accompanied by haunting cor anglais. Making her FGO debut, the soprano balanced power and pathos beautifully in her portrayal of an impossible love. Davila does not have a voice of great colour, but he is a well-schooled tenor of clarity and accuracy, and his passionate engagement with Wilson's Amelia was richly nuanced.

Thomas is a superb Verdi baritone, and he brought an uncanny mix of formality and warmth to the tormented Anckarström, whose sense of being wronged by his wife and Gustavo leads him to join a conspiracy to assassinate the king. His magnificent aria of revenge, 'Eri tu', was overwhelming. The incantation scene of Madame Arvidson (the smoky-voiced mezzo-soprano Dana Beth Miller) had a suitably spooky atmosphere and movement that suggested the ritualized choreography of Martha Graham. As Oscar, the soprano Elena Galván was adorable in the coloratura display of 'Saper vorreste', scampering among the masqueraders, oblivious to the disaster about to unfold.

For all its merits, FGO's *Ballo*, directed by Marco Pelle, fell foul of a muddled conception in which the drama nominally took place in Verdi's original setting of Stockholm, rather than the colonial Boston that the composer and his librettist Antonio Somma settled on to mollify censors for the 1859 premiere in Rome. The Stockholm setting is commonly used nowadays, but there was nothing particularly Swedish in this staging. Instead, Eric Fielding's scenery (from Utah Opera) evoked New Orleans, with wrought-iron balconies and above-ground graves in the second act.

The conductor Ramón Tebar drew a fine performance from the 54-piece orchestra, which included a cimballo (played by Jay Bertolet) that gave the low brass extra punch in the glorious Act 1 finale. But sadly missing was an onstage string band for the masked ball's mazurka, which was played from the pit. The costume designer Howard Tsvi Kaplan did a good job with period garb such as the dark velvet coats of the king's courtiers and the elegant green gown Amelia wore to pick herbs in the graveyard. JOHN FLEMING

New York

Sometimes thematic programming can be powerfully effective. But sometimes the container is subverted by its contents, with the overarching theme more compelling than the actual operas or art works or dramas meant to realize it. For the past three seasons ON SITE OPERA has been presenting a Beaumarchais trilogy, with Rossini and Mozart replaced by Paisiello (charming music, though I missed that production) and Marcos Portugal (not exactly a match for his better-known operatic competitor). The cycle concluded with Darius Milhaud's take on the least-well-known Beaumarchais sequel, *La Mère coupable*. It was not a success.

The problems with the work begin with Beaumarchais's own dour take on the Almadiva household 20 years after *The Marriage of Figaro*, beset with illegitimate children and a creepy Irish interloper trying to worm his way into the Count's fortune. Milhaud worked with his wife Madeleine's adaptation of the play; he had composed some nicely energetic, perky music earlier on in his career (including the semi-jazzy *La Création du monde*), but by this time (1965) he had evolved, or devolved, into a kind of tuneless modernism.

The opera has never caught on, and the effect here was of a hectoring onslaught, sung in clumsy French. Eric Einhorn's staging oddly shifted locations after the intermission, within the cavernous GARAGE, to no obvious effect. Geoffrey McDonald conducted the admirable International Contemporary Ensemble, with 13 players in a string-shy orchestration by Nicholas DeMaison. The cast was solid: Matthew Burns, a bass-baritone, as the villain Bégearss, plus Marie Lenormand, Marcus DeLoach, Adam Cannedy, Amy Owens, Jennifer Black and Christian Zaremba, with an indisposed Andrew Owens singing at half voice (it proved impossible to train a replacement in Milhaud's complex, tune-free music).

Stephen Sondheim may resist being called an operatic composer, but his musicals are operas nonetheless. Since the first appearance of his *Assassins* Off Broadway in 1991, this mightily strange but compelling concoction by Sondheim (music and lyrics) and John Weidman

■ *On Site Opera's 'La Mère coupable': the Countess (Jennifer Black) prepares Florestine (Amy Owens) for her wedding*

