

Handel's 'Orlando': Passionate as Puccini, but funnier



George
Frederick
Handel

By **Jim Lowe** Times Argus Staff - Published: June 15, 2010

MIDDLEBURY – It may come as a surprise to some, but Handel's operas offer as much beautiful passion and anguish as Puccini. And, unlike Puccini, Handel's operas had a sense of humor.

All this and more was in evidence, Sunday at the Town Hall Theater, when the Green Mountain Opera Festival presented Handel's "Orlando," a story of glory and frustrated love, performed by members of its Emerging Artist Program. The well-sung and most entertaining performance, which will be repeated on Thursday at 7:30 p.m. at Waitsfield's Skinner Barn, was simply staged, with chamber orchestra, and sung in its original Italian with English supertitles.

It's important to note that the Emerging Artist Program is not for student singers; rather it is for young professionals beginning serious careers in opera. In Sunday's performance, all five performers proved fine singers with impressive voices, as well as convincing actors.

"Orlando" is the story of a war hero unused to the travails of love. When he falls for Angelica, he expects to conquer her as easily as he has enemies. Instead, she is in love with Medoro. And so is Dorinda, the girl who lives in the woods. Rather than destroy Angelica and Medoro, which is Orlando's instinctive response, he goes mad. It takes the zany magician Zoroastro (much funnier than Mozart's Sarastro) to make it right.

To modern audiences, there is a certain gender ambiguity in the casting. Orlando was originally sung by a castrato (just what it sounds like), and is now sung by a counter tenor, who sings in a woman's alto range. Medoro is played by a woman, an alto or mezzo-soprano. Of course, the women are sung by women. Only Zoroastro is sung in the traditionally male range, a bass. Almost surprisingly, one grows used to this fairly quickly.

This production benefited from a particularly expressive cast, both vocally and theatrically. Counter tenor Orlando Pagenkopf sang warmly with a mellow voice. His tender expression of love for all his friends, with viola and cello obbligato, was as heart-wrenching as any Puccini aria. Cairan Ryan, a light-voiced bass, sang deftly as Zoroastro and was quite funny.

Soprano Margot Rood gave Dorinda a natural innocence and sang with crystalline lyricism. Soprano Greer Davis gave the troubled Angelica a depth and sang with passion and nuance. Mezzo-soprano Shirin Eskandani was warm, tender and lyrical as Medoro.

These performers combined fine singing with some excellent theater to make this introspective opera so entertaining. Sanford Sylvan, who has been coaching the program, directed the imaginative production, which he cut from three to two hours (with intermission). It was fun to watch the respected American baritone as the Buster Keaton-like janitor move props about the stage.

Bruce Stasyna, the program's director, led an excellent string quintet from the (electronic) harpsichord, conducting a lively and "historically informed" performance. Sunday's performance took a little time to warm up, both for the singers and instrumentalists, but great fun ensued.