

## Cecilia Bartoli in recital—pure magic

By EMAN ISADIAR  
Special to the Epoch Times

BERKELEY—Each season, many artists of international stature sell out UC Berkeley's Zellerbach Hall. But few can do so in the winter's heaviest downpour, and none on the afternoon of the Oscars—that is, none other than the legendary mezzo-soprano Cecilia Bartoli.

The Bay Area's love affair with Bartoli began 18 long years ago when, as an emerging young talent, she made her West Coast debut on the very same campus. She returned for a single appearance in 2005, and now in 2009 Cal Performances presented Cecilia Bartoli in recital last Sunday—as a seasoned artist at the peak of her brilliance.

Loyal fans braved the inclement weather, many traveling from afar to hear Bartoli's program entitled Maria Malibran's Salon Romantique with pianist Sergio Ciomei.

### Hot on the Trail of Maria Malibran

One might ask, "Who exactly is Maria Malibran, and what relation is she to Cecilia Bartoli?"

Apparently, Malibran was a superbly gifted 19th century singer, whose untimely death at age 28 may well have robbed the world of the greatest mezzo-soprano of all time. She is credited with starring in the 1825 production of Rossini's Barber of Seville in New York—the first opera ever to be performed in America.

Aside from her flawless vocal technique, Malibran is also remembered for breaking free of male domination and pursuing a life on her own terms.

Bartoli has once again brought a scholarly approach to her new topic of research, this time the great Maria Malibran. She is the central theme of Bartoli's current world tour on the heels of a hugely successful concert with the Orchestra La Scintilla in 2007, the release of her two latest albums and a double DVD set.

### Performance Highlights

The program opened with "La regatta veneziana": three light-hearted songs in Venetian dialect written during Rossini's curiously late creative surge long after his operas. Bartoli's trademark facial humor was the perfect ice-breaker as she sang in what must be a strange-sounding country accent to the native Roman.

Then followed a variety of songs by Bellini and, again, by Rossini—both contemporaries of and collaborators with Maria Malibran. This portion of the recital seemed to alternate in mood between playful and somber.

In one of the recital's unforgettable highlights, Bartoli struck a deeply emotional chord with Bellini's "Dolente imagine" ("Sorrowful Image"), which she delivered with heart-breaking tenderness.

Another magical moment came after intermission in Donizetti's "Amore e morte" ("Love and Death"), which was also tragic. This particular piece revealed Bartoli's unique ability to inhabit her music,

as she remained visibly affected by the song's poignant text long after the applause.

The music that followed was decidedly more cheerful with another song by Donizetti, "La conocchia" ("The Distaff"), which had more eyebrow humour in yet another exaggerated accent—this time Neapolitan. Then came more satirical late Rossini, leading to the recital's climax at the end of the program.

### The Show-Stopper

The four final pieces were the consummation of the program's theme: the beautifully lyrical "Havanaise" and "Hai luli" composed by Maria Malibran's sister; the provocative "Yo que soy contrabandista" ("I'm a Smuggler") by her father; and the show-stopper by Maria herself, "Rataplan," a title without meaning, solely used to imitate the sound of beating drums.

In a stroke of pure originality during the last piece, Bartoli's brilliant accompanist Sergio Ciomei—an accomplished artist in his own right—slyly slipped one of the pages of the sheet music inside the piano between the dampers and the strings, creating a rattling noise vaguely resembling the sound of a military snare drum.

### The Secret Ingredient

Though Bartoli's rapid staccati and delicate runs and ornaments boggle the mind, her distant, heavenly pianissimo is what tugs at the heartstrings. Her unmistakable timber is free of the incidental breathy noises of mortal human air pipes. Then, there is her sharp artistic wit and warm, authentic personality.

While a select group of divas can dazzle audiences in lavish opera productions, Cecilia Bartoli comes to us with a dose of something different—a secret ingredient of unknown origin.

Perhaps it is the palpable sincerity in her voice, the mysterious personal connection with each of her listeners, or her involvement with the audience as a whole. Whatever the nameless element, Cecilia Bartoli is bona fide star material of the type that crosses our galaxy only once in every generation. We are lucky it happens to be ours.

### A Touching Farewell

The end of the program brought a series of delightful short encores: "Caro, ti voglio tanto bene" by Ernesto De Curtis, "Les ramparts de Seville" from Bizet's Carmen, and the syncopated and lively "Canto Negro" by Xavier Montsalvatge.

Bartoli left her star-struck public with a fourth and final encore, again by De Curtis.

Making eye-contact as though with each person in the audience, she bid a soul-stirring farewell with the song "Non ti scordar di me"—"Oh Forget Me Not."

The invisible supertitle to the crowd's feverish applause read: "Non ci scordiamo" ("We Shall Not Forget").

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Cecilia Bartoli makes a single, sold-out stop in the Bay Area on her world tour honouring Maria Malibran. ULI WEBER/DECCA

## Divine Performing Arts delights London's West End on opening night

By SIMON VEAZEY & FLORIAN GODOVITS  
Epoch Times Staff

LONDON—The opening night of *Shen Yun*, Divine Performing Arts 2009 World Tour in London's West End, was lauded with a standing ovation on Tuesday, March 3.

The audience at the New London Theatre was delighted with the showcase of classical Chinese classical dance and traditional culture,

billed as a colourful gala of dance and music.

"I love this," said Ms. Gray, a building designer who had come to see the show with her daughter. "It's the best one I've ever seen."

"It's kind of like being in another culture but in the middle of London—it's amazing! It's very outstanding actually."

"I'm just fascinated by the culture," her daughter Ruby added, who is learning Mandarin at school.

The New London Theatre, opened in 1973, is situated in London's famous West End. Often compared to New York's Broadway, West End theatre is synonymous with the highest calibre of performance in the English-speaking world. Andrew Lloyd Webber's famous musical *Cats* opened at the New London Theatre, where it ran for 21 years.

The West End audience responded very enthusiastically to every piece in the Divine Performing Arts show,

warmly applauding dance solos and cheering as they rose to a standing ovation for the two curtain calls.

*The Divine Performing Arts (DPA) New York Company had come to London from a weekend of successful shows in Paris on the European leg of its tour.*

*The Epoch Times is a proud sponsor of Shen Yun, Divine Performing Arts 2009 World Tour. Please see DivinePerformingArts.org for more information.*

## Moral reminder by old masters and John Calvin

AMSTERDAM—(Reuters) Snuffed-out candles, skulls, and hourglasses were how the Old Masters portrayed the vanity of greed, often referred to as the "vanitas genre." For the Dutch, the credit crunch has revived a moralistic stance from back when the first share was issued in Amsterdam.

Erupting on the 500th anniversary of the birth of Protestant theologian John Calvin, the financial crisis has spawned a spurge of puritanical debate and self-analysis.

Its 17th-century art and literature routinely included reminders not to let selfish desires distract people from their duties.

The paintings of exotic tulips and overflowing fruit bowls that reflected the opulence of the Dutch Golden Age were often framed by insidious symbols of the inevitability of death to show material things do not last.

In Hendrick Gerritsz Pot's famous painting, "Flora's Wagon of Fools," weavers drop their looms to join the goddess of flowers in a doomed quest for riches, reflecting concern that work was being supplanted by idle and illusory routes to wealth.

"These paintings were a warning—a moral reminder—to watch what you are doing since there will be the inevitable moment of death," said Pieter Roelofs, a curator at the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam.

"So you can try to be the best in your field and make as much money as you can, but when you are faced with judgment, you won't be credited for your wealth but how you acted in the broader social context."



CAN'T TAKE IT WITH YOU: The financial crisis is causing the Dutch to reflect on pursuing wealth over high moral behaviour. WIKIPEDIA.ORG

When tulip bulb prices collapsed in 1637 and many people refused to honour contracts, it sent a shiver through a trading community that relied on trust, a wave of self-doubt

similar to sentiments expressed after markets tumbled last year.

Although Calvin focused his efforts on France, he preached in Geneva and Strasbourg. The

French-speaking provinces of the Netherlands soon adopted his Protestant approach, eventually leading to the first synod of the Dutch Reformed Church in 1571.

## Theatre review: 'Shipwrecked! An Entertainment—The Amazing Adventures of Louis de Rougemont'

### A great adventurer—or a mountebank?

By DIANA BARTH  
Special to the Epoch Times

NEW YORK—How odd for the highly skilled, realistic playwright, Donald Margulies, the author of the Pulitzer Prize-winning "Dinner with Friends," also "Sight Unseen," and "Collected Stories," all critically and popularly acclaimed, to turn to writing something with the above-named title.

In Margulies's own words, he "wanted to simply write a rip-roaring yarn...to return to a bare stage and literally get back to basics...using as few props and as little scenery as possible...a play that would invite people who had never seen one into the theatre and give them a sense of the excitement I had when I was a kid at my first Broadway show."

Donald Margulies has come up with "Shipwrecked..." a delicious mélange of (good) children's theatre, vaudeville, and old-time radio shows before an audience. The main character, and incidents, are all based on an actual person and events: Louis de Rougemont's exploits transfixed the Victorian era public.

As for this play: A circular platform takes up about three-quarters of the stage. At its edges are various accoutrements such as a large bass drum, cymbals, microphone—in short, various sound-effect paraphernalia.

Taking stage and directly addressing the audience is Louis de Rougemont himself, in the person of actor Michael Countryman. De Rougemont regales us with his adventures. Among his many exploits he claims he was shipwrecked during a violent storm; landed in the Coral Sea; went pearl fishing and found enormous pearls, including natural, highly valuable black pearls; was attacked by a gigantic octopus but survived to tell of it; lived in Australia; lived 30 years among a tribe of cannibals and married an abo-

original woman who bore him two daughters.

He later returns to London and civilized society and comes to wish he hadn't.

In Mr. Countryman's tour-de-force performance he exhibits charm, enthusiasm and shrewdness, and always keeps us interested, while never leaving the stage.

In this theatrical display, de Rougemont is assisted by Player 1 (Donnetta Lavinia Grays) and Player 2 (Jeremy Bobb). Ms. Grays plays a wide variety of roles: a rugged and wily sea captain, an aboriginal wom-

an—smoothly changing her voice and physical carriage. She portrays males and females with equal ease.

Mr. Bobb likewise essays male and female roles. My favourite was his portrayal of Queen Victoria, replete in velvet gown and wig. How he convincingly projects her short stature is a marvel of the actor's skill, and kneepads. Both performers move beautifully and are skilled mimes.

The show makes one wonder: Is truth always to be desired when deceit can be sometimes so enticing?

Director Lisa Peterson has created a slew of lively and unusual an-

tics, undoubtedly aided by her trio of creative actors. Adding to the frolic are a few sound persons, attired in black, and thus "invisible" as in the Asian theatre manner, striking various gongs, whistles, and vibrating and scratchy instruments.

Set design by Neil Patel, in which the platform revolves, absolutely fills the bill as do costumes by Michael Krass, lighting by Stephen Strawbridge, with excellent original music and sound by John Gromada.

Here's a treat for the theatregoers of all ages.

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Excellent work by performers Donnetta Lavinia Grays and Jeremy Bobb. DIANA BARTH