

What's Not On TV

Queen-on-queen violence comes to a head in COC's Maria Stuarda

Donizetti's 1834 opera focuses on the voice rather than the narrative

By ZOE ACKAH
Epoch Times Staff

When an opera is based on history it makes for a great reading opportunity. Before attending the Canadian Opera Company's production of *Maria Stuarda*, I took three books out of the library: One about the Tudor monarchy, one about the English nobility of the time, and a biography of Mary Stewart.

I couldn't put Mary Stewart's biography down. The COC had the same idea, forming a book club in the run-up to opening night with weekly updates and club member commentary on their website. By opening night everyone was on the same page.

You've heard about the inbred, loony and barbaric European nobility of the 16th century. You've seen the movies and maybe the CBC mini-series (unless, like me, you don't watch TV).

Donizetti's *Maria Stuarda* has a touch of historical truth—definitely of the “stranger than” variety—but is mostly fiction. It is however an effective character sketch of Elizabeth I and Mary, Queen of Scots. Its most famous scene is a catfight between two women who, in reality, never met face to face.

The opera itself has an interesting history, having been banned twice. It debuted in 1834 to a post-Napoleon Europe. Decapitating monarchs was touchy subject matter, and queen-on-queen violence was not a good look for an already besmirched royal class. As a result the opera was banned in Naples and later Milan, remaining essentially unheard until 1958.

During the golden era of opera, when this work was written, the focus was not on the composer's overarching narrative but on the voice and its powerful expressive capabilities. The music and plot are vehicles for the primacy of the voice. The notes sung paint a portrait of the characters' emotions, each an opportunity for the singer to both show off technical skill and emote simultaneously.

Musical characterization is written into these operas. To Italian Catholics, Elizabeth was seen as a temperamental, indecisive, and vengeful heretic (read unmarried Protestant bad girl). Her part is filled with extremes of register, scary angry high notes, and complicated, melismatic phrases. Mary on the other hand is the naive and dependent martyr (read good Catholic girl). Her notes are held longer with



(L-R) Alexandrina Pendatchanska as Elisabetta, Queen of England, and Serena Farnocchia as Maria Stuarda in the Canadian Opera Company's production of *Maria Stuarda*, 2010. MICHAEL COOPER DONIZETTI'S 1834 OPERA FOCUSES ON THE VOICE RATHER THAN THE NARRATIVE

fewer extremes in her range. Her songs are sweeter and less complicated.

I always end up liking Elizabeth more. This COC's production was no exception. I loved Alexandrina Pendatchanska's Elisabetta. She was on fire, practically spitting. Her voice nimble, and her delivery crisp, she had me on the edge of my seat. I missed her energy in the second act, where Elisabetta really only appears to watch the beheading.

Our Mary Stewart, Serena Farnocchia, has beautiful timbre. Her held notes are luxurious, but the rhythmic precision and dead-on intonation are not always present. She wanted feeling, and failed to give her Maria a defined character. Still, the

casting played to the strengths of each woman's voice, making the production work fairly well overall.

Eric Cutler was a fine Earl of Leicester with a strong, bright and ringing tone. Weston Hurt as Cecil didn't have the projection or top end frequency in his voice to provide adequate support when singing in ensem-

ble, which made everything a little unstable and flat. Patrick Carfizzi was OK but had the same problem, so projecting over the orchestra was a bit difficult at times.

The direction, the set, and the costumes faithfully supported the music. I found the direction of Stephen Lawless was passable in the first act, but very good in

the second. I felt the way he handled the chorus at the end was particularly effective.

Overall, I had a great time. There were a couple of truly magical moments. It played to my conservative side and was opera as I like it best at this phase in my fandom—big costumes, big hair, and, most importantly, big voices!

CORRECTION: The photo captions used for ?Ottawa Chamberfest refines chamber music's intimate traditions? in the April 29 edition were reversed. Polish Ambassador to Canada, Zenon Kosiniak-Kaminski is pictured on the left and Roman Borys, artistic director of the Ottawa International Chamber Music Festival is pictured on the right.

Famed pianist aims to get young people stoked on classical music

By MADALINA HUBERT
Epoch Times Staff

In the picture, a young man stands on top of a grand piano with ripped jeans, frowning at the ceiling. At first glance, this is a rebellious teenager whose musical tastes most likely lie in punk, rock or techno.

But don't be fooled by appearances. This is Haiou Zhang, one of the most talented classical pianists today whose brilliant performances have evoked poetry and standing ovations from veteran concertgoers.

This and other pictures are displayed on Zhang's website. He hopes more young people will become interested in classical music, an important issue the classical music community is facing in the 21st century.

At just 25, Zhang has performed with some of the world's most celebrated orchestras and sold more than 30,000 CDs in his native China. He is currently performing in a six-city concert tour with the famed Slovak Sinfonietta orchestras in its Canadian debut.

Many young people would prefer to go to discos and drink rather than spend that money on a concert, explains Zhang. But that doesn't mean young people don't like classical music.

"I went to some high schools and some colleges. I went there to talk to them and introduce them to some really good music and they were totally interested. They were sitting there listening to Claude Debussy and French impressionists so quietly. I didn't expect that at all," he said, adding that young people need to be led to good music.

ZHANG CALLS CLASSICAL

MUSIC "PURE GOLD."

"Even I as a professional musician, every day when I get up and switch on the iPod to listen to music, it makes me feel really good, and feel quite a lot of power to begin my day," he said.

While some may think that classical music is outdated, Zhang points out that the perception a few hundred years ago was very different.

"At that time, this was pop music, it was rock music. Mozart was the Michael Jackson of his time," he said.

'Mozart was the Michael Jackson of his time.' —
Classical pianist
Haiou Zhang

What modern people consider classical music now may have been revolutionary back then. Zhang referred to the 2nd movement of Beethoven's last piano sonata, opus 111, calling the rhythm similar to Boogie-woogie, a musical style popular in the 1930s and 40s.

"When audiences at that time (200 years ago) heard this kind of Boogie-woogie rhythm, they were totally shocked, they were blown away, and this is the pop music at that time, and this music led us to the future," he said.

CHINESE ROOTS

Unlike most other pianists, Zhang took up the instrument relatively late—he was 9 years old, when the average age is to begin 4 or 5. It was fashionable in China at that time to take piano lessons, but soon the young boy showed talent beyond his years. A year later, he was one of only 4 out of more than 100 students to be accepted to the Central Conservatory of Music in Beijing.

It was not love at first sight. The long hours were grueling, and it wasn't until his late teens that Zhang started to love the piano. "It was a process," he said, adding that years of practice have forged a strong bond with the instrument.

"There's always something indescribable between the piano and me. It has grown into my blood, my body, and I feel it is part of me. Sometimes when I feel a little tired, as soon as I touch the keyboard, I feel immediately much better."

On his European tours, audiences often wonder how he can relate so well to Western music. His answer is simple. "I think the classical music, Bach, Beethoven or Mozart, is not only music related to an individual nation, it's universal, it's something global and universal. It shows power and understanding of the highest level of humanity."

Zhang said he found a connection between the music of Chopin, one of his favourite composers, and ancient Chinese poems. "There are indescribably beautiful scenes from these old Chinese poems, the mountains, the lake, everything." When he closed his eyes and tried to imagine what Chopin felt when he composed his Nocturnes, he saw a connection between the two.



Classical pianist Haiou Zhang says what is considered classical music today may have been revolutionary 200 years ago.

In fact, he found that the more he understood his own country's history, the more he could understand that of others.

CANADIAN TOUR

This is Haiou Zhang's third return to Canada, having first performed to acclaim with Kerry Stratton and the Toronto Philharmonic in 2007. On Monday night, he performed Beethoven's piano concerto along with the Slovak Sinfonietta in a concert that also featured American award-winning pianist Elaine Kwon. Kwon performed Anton Rubinstein's piano concerto no. 4. The artists were all greeted with standing ovations.

"Everywhere is passion and power. That's why I'm loving it," said Zhang of Rubenstein's Emperor concerto. He also particularly valued the poetic quality of the piece, especially the 2nd movement.

"You can easily find [poetry] in the slow movement. Fast passages, you can hardly find it, but it doesn't mean that it doesn't exist. You just have to discover everything yourself."

He said he particularly appreciated the opportunity to play with the Slovak Sinfonietta, many of whose 38 members are award-winning artists.

"They are very good musicians, so I feel comfortable to perform

with them. A good orchestra makes you feel free," he said, explaining that the feeling comes from playing well together.

Following the Canadian tour, Zhang will hold a master class, teaching and performing at New York State University. This summer, he is looking forward to another landmark in his young career—a small community near Hamburg, in Germany (where he now makes his home) will host the Haiou Zhang festival, named in his honour.

The Slovak Sinfonietta and Haiou Zhang will hold two more concerts in Canada: May 5 in Richmond Hill and May 8 in Niagara Falls.