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Kurt Streit (Nero) and Susan Graham (Poppea)
Photo: Robert Millard

Stunning but immoral, LA Opera's 'Poppea' may not be for everyone. Still, it was a stunning production thanks to a creative team.

CLAUDIO MONTEVERDI
L'INCORONAZIONE DI POPPEA
LOS ANGELES OPERA
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By: Carol Jean Delmar
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In Baroque opera, anything goes. Women play men and men play women; men play men but sing like women; men sing like men but dress like women; and then there are those who are bi. No combination is verboten – it all depends on the director.

In the original 1994 Netherlands Opera production of “L’Incoronazione di Poppea,” Emperor Nero was played by a woman who sounded like a woman and made love to a woman; but Ottone, Nero’s mistress’s former lover, was played by a man who sounded

like a woman.

In the same production, which has been transported to Los Angeles Opera at the Dorothy Chandler Pavilion this month, Ottone still sounds like a woman, but Nero is very much a heterosexual man – that is until he kisses his male friend Lucano.

It's a long opera, almost four hours in length, and it originally included both castrato and travesti roles, which are now determined by each production's director.

Monteverdi's three-act opera, with a libretto by Giovanni Francesco Busenello, was the first opera to be based on history rather than myth. It premiered in Venice in either 1642 or '43, and the action takes place in Rome in A.D. 62 or 64. Sources differ. In fact, there have been many questions raised by this opera because only a Venice and a Naples manuscript survive. Monteverdi's original score has been lost, and the orchestrations vary. In fact, most sources claim that the work has not only been penned by Monteverdi, but by other composers as well.

The music sounds moral and almost religious and spiritual, yet it is truly an immoral opera where virtue does not prevail. Ottone returns from war anxious for a reunion with his lover, Poppea, only to discover that she is having an affair with the married Emperor Nero. Nero, who is very much in love with Poppea, promises to make her his wife. Ottavia, the real empress, is urged not to seek vengeance by the aged philosopher, Seneca, who also tries to reason with her husband, Nero. Poppea convinces Nero that Seneca is a threat, so Nero sentences him to death. Ottavia demands that Ottone kill Poppea. Drusilla, a lady of the court, seeks Ottone's love and offers to help with the deed by disguising Ottone with her clothes, but Amore (the goddess of Love/Cupid) intervenes and saves Poppea. Drusilla is arrested. Ottone confesses and implicates Ottavia; and the three are banished into exile. Nero and Poppea triumph, and Poppea becomes the new empress.

The music is all very Baroque, and for LA Opera's current production, some very ancient instruments have been imported in, including a harp; pipes; two harpsichords; an organ; two theorbos, long-necked plucked string instruments/lutes; and a lirone, a bowed bass string instrument held between the legs. On Sunday, Dec. 3, the violins, viola and cello seemed prosaic by comparison. Under the baton of Harry Bicket behind one of the harpsichords, the small orchestra perfectly complemented the singers' arias, ariosos and recitatives.

THE CAST

Reinhard Hagen as Seneca stood out above the rest because of his rich deep bass. His mellow voice warms one's insides like a smooth hot toddy. He is young and definitely on the way up.

Susan Graham's portrayal of Poppea was graceful but a little too controlled. Her voice was compelling and dynamic at times; at others, it was as pure as a clear blue stream flowing through a secluded wood, especially during her final duet with Nero. When she

and tenor Kurt Streit sang “Pur ti miro, pur ti godo,” the two never touched, but their voices harmonized together to create a beauty of sound that caused everyone to hold their breath. It was definitely a moment to savor.

Streit’s securely-sung Nero was strong, masculine and sexual. As Ottavia, Frederica von Stade showed the noble side of her character as well as her character’s anguish, especially in the intense “Addio Roma, addio patria, amici addio.”

Countertenor David Daniels was an admirable Ottone; however singing beside both Graham and von Stade, his voice didn’t carry as well and didn’t ring forward in comparison, although a few higher tones were really luscious. Tenor Christopher Gillett seemed to have a similar problem, yet his portrayal of Poppea’s nurse, Arnalta, was a sheer delight as he meandered around the stage in drag like a wind-up Coppélia doll, or Olympia in “The Tales of Hoffmann.” He moved like a Robert Wilson mannequin, but with unbridled emotion. His Harlequin-like costume added a Commedia dell’arte touch, and he brought some light-hearted comedy to the otherwise serious proceedings.

The remainder of the singers created a polished ensemble, with soprano Christine Brandes and mezzo-soprano Jill Grove leading the pack.

THE PRODUCTION

In this production of “Poppea,” which exhibited a stylized minimalistic, geometric set -- less was definitely more. It was a stunning production thanks to a creative team which included director Pierre Audi, set designer Michael Simon, lighting designer Jean Kalman and costume designer Emi Wada. Both sides of the stage extended over the pit, and a small orchestra was beneath the stage in the center. Singers made entrances and exits on a short flight of stairs leading from the stage to the pit. The backdrops remained stark until the final act when they suggested hills and mountains. The set was open without a curtain, and for those who remained in their seats during the two intermissions, set changes were in full view. There were a few rocks here-and-there, some special effects like live flames of fire, but it was the costumes that gave the stage its pizzazz.

Emi Wada, who has also designed the costumes for the world premiere of “The First Emperor” at the Met this month, utilized the concept of ancient Greek and Roman costuming with variations to the toga, chiton and himation. Her fabrics looked unique -- she must have traveled throughout the world to acquire them. Seneca’s costumes were hand-woven, and Nero was dressed in gold. The colors were striking, and according to a story in the Los Angeles Times (Nov. 26), Wada dyed all of the materials herself and wove them on equipment flown to LA from Amsterdam. But it was the way the materials were sewn together that made them so singular. Some of the costumes looked like patchwork. Some were rich, heavy and regal while others were light, graceful and airy-looking. Arnalta’s haute couture was worthy of the fashion at a costume ball.

But why was everyone barefoot? Wada told the LA Times that Audi wanted a timeless production and that shoes always give away the period. This “Poppea” may have taken place in a jazzed up Rome, but this Rome was definitely reminiscent of the period in

history that Monteverdi assigned to it.

“L’incoronazione di Poppea” may not be for everyone. A number of people left during the intermissions on the day that I saw it. But it is definitely for those who want a different kind of operatic experience, and for those who want to talk about it after.

Conductor, Harry Bicket

Director, Pierre Audi

Associate Director, Miranda Lakerveld

Set Designer, Michael Simon

Costume Designer, Emi Wada

Lighting Designer, Jean Kalman

King’s Music edition by Clifford and Elaine Bartlett