



Dicono di lui

A bold take on ‘Richard III’

by George Loomis

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ANTWERP — The combination of an Italian composer and a Flemish opera company may seem unlikely, but Giorgio Battistelli’s “Richard III,” which had its world premiere at the Flemish Opera last week, is a gripping contribution to English-language opera. The subject alone is intriguing: It is one of Shakespeare’s most popular plays and a representative of a category of his works - the history plays - that has attracted scant interest from opera composers. Most operagoers encounter a history play only in Verdi’s “Falstaff,” and there just a snippet - the honor monologue from “Henry IV, Part I,” dropped into an opera otherwise based on “The Merry Wives of Windsor.”

We know from history that the real Richard III was nothing like Shakespeare’s power-craving psychopath. But for Battistelli the play’s the thing, and it is the protagonist’s status as a prototype for the 20th-century monster that especially attracted him. The new opera capitalizes on the play’s theatrical power and indeed partakes of its text.

Ian Burton’s libretto follows the practice of Britten’s “A Midsummer Night’s Dream” by boiling down and reworking its source to operatic dimensions. Its two substantial acts review, respectively, Richard’s rise to power and his time on the throne. Not surprisingly, Act 1 is notably longer than Act 2, though the many murders that strew Richard’s sordid career path, including those of his young nephews in the Tower of London, are apportioned between them both.

Battistelli’s post-modernist style offers its own take on astringent 20th-century atonality, which fits hand and glove with the subject. There is a real difference between an opera like “Richard III” and new operas in the United States, which tend to use atonality cautiously - if at all - along with, say, jazz rhythms and the occasional hummable tune. The boar hunt depicted in the orchestral prelude, with its wavy textures, percussion gasps, wordless choral voices and anguished cries from lower strings, arrestingly sets the tone. Thereafter the opera proceeds in an unbroken flow of fragmented utterances, assertive repeated-figures and a few recurring themes, such as the choral tribute to the newly crowned Richard at the end of Act 1. Yet a couple of pieces bear the label of aria, and the opera’s compelling scene structure sometimes gives the sense of set numbers.



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The chief fault of “Richard III” lies in its text setting. Proponents of opera in English - “Richard III” was written in English and performed with Flemish supertitles - argue that if only singers enunciate clearly and conductors keep the orchestra under control, words will come through. But Battistelli stacks the deck against them with heavy, though interesting orchestration, and angular vocal writing with long note values doesn’t help.

Two scenes in which the composer takes a another approach thus stand out. One comes when Richard’s henchman Tyrrel, supported only by wordless choral singing, recounts the murder of the nephews as their butchered bodies lie in a wheelbarrow before him. The other comes when Richmond (Henry VII), surrounded by corpses, proclaims the end of the Wars of the Roses in a speaking voice dulled by the carnage, as choral voices are again heard.

Robert Carsen’s vivid staging deserves a share of the credit for this shattering close. Ever the innovator, Carsen departs from the libretto even for a world premiere, strikingly so when he has Richmond stab Richard prematurely. The latter’s speech “A Horse, a horse, my kingdom for a horse!” thus becomes the deluded cry of a dying man. Radu Boruzescu’s set depicting the wooden benches of a skeletal theater arising from red (blood?) sand and the black business suits of Miruna Boruzescu’s costumes give the staging the lean look of a modern Shakespeare production.

The large and impressive cast consists mainly of American and British singers. The fine baritone Scott Hendricks brilliantly played the hunchbacked Richard as a demented Rigoletto, with jagged, epileptic gestures. Urban Malmberg, as Buckingham, supported him unflinchingly, and the baritone Russell Smythe sang nobly as Hastings, the ill-fated champion of the young brothers. Mark Tevis brought an attractive tenor to the dual roles of Clarence, Richard’s slain brother, and Tyrrel; while the measured tones of Timothy Simpson, another tenor, brought a sense of stability as Richmond. Lisa Houben, as Richard’s wife, Anne, and Anne Mason, as his mother, the Duchess of York, each had strong moments invenomously denouncing Richard to his face, and Lynne Dawson, as Queen Elizabeth, portrayed another beleaguered woman. The countertenor Jonathan De Ceuster was touching as the short-lived Prince Edward.

Luca Pfaff conducted with clarity and strength, and the Flemish Opera’s choral and orchestral forces handsomely proved their worth. Yes, Pfaff could have kept the orchestra down more, but that would have lessened the opera’s visceral impact. In any case, when “Richard III” is done in Britain or the United States, English supertitles will be a must, so we don’t lose a line.