

Teatro Nuovo: Rising Artists Revive Bel Canto in NYC

By Fred Cohn, *Musical America*

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Bel canto opera has fallen well out of the mainstream of New York's operatic life. In times gone by, the Met and New York City Opera would regularly mount works by Bellini, Donizetti, and Rossini for stars like Beverly Sills and Joan Sutherland; Eve Queler's Opera Orchestra of New York would offer concert performances of early nineteenth-century bel canto rarities. Now Queler's outfit is moribund; City Opera in its current incarnation is only sporadically active—and never in this repertoire; the Met has programmed not a single bel canto piece for its 2023–24 season.

In this context, Will Crutchfield's Teatro Nuovo isn't just an outlier: for fans of bel canto, it's a godsend. Crutchfield is not just an impresario but also a musicologist specializing in bel canto, and his organization puts his knowledge into practice. Its young singers go through a six-week period-practice training program, culminating in semi-staged public performances of two bel canto pieces; first at New Jersey's Montclair State University, then at Jazz in Lincoln Center's Rose Theater. Its orchestra uses period instruments, to invigorating effect. The focus is on the music itself: singers wear concert garb; the stagings consist of little more than rudimentary movements in front of projected backgrounds. But the performances' "semi-staged" nature banishes music stands: the singers work off-book, with the freedom to engage with one another; an actual drama unfolds on stage.

On July 19, Donizetti's *Poliuto* provided a smashing kickoff to this summer's Rose Theater stint. The 1838 piece is not totally obscure—there's a riveting live recording of a 1960 La Scala production, with Franco Corelli and Maria Callas—but it has not received a full New York production since 1870. The Teatro Nuovo performance made a listener wonder how this city could have so long ignored it.

True, *Poliuto's* plot, derived from Pierre Corneille's *Polyeucte*, is standard-issue *opera seria* stuff: a Roman-empire love triangle involving the title character, an early Christian convert; his wife Paolina; and her former lover Severo, the Roman proconsul. But the conventional scenario brings forth from some of Donizetti's most brilliant invention: the work has scarcely a dull moment. The three principals all get meaty solo opportunities. The massed ensemble that caps Act II functions much like the *Lucia* sextet, and hardly suffers from the comparison. Best of all is the *finale ultimo*, consisting of a multi-movement duet for Poliuto and Paolina, and ending in a stirring cabaletta as they stride jubilantly toward martyrdom.



Chelsea Lehnea sings *Paolina* in *Donizetti's Poliuto* at the Rose Theater

Teatro Nuovo offered *Poliuto* complete, with an overture interpolated from *Les Martyrs*, the composer's French revision of the piece. The period winds at the very beginning announced that we were going to hear nothing like a conventional big-house bel canto performance. They were rawer in sound than their modern counterparts; in tandem with the band's valveless horns, they contributed to orchestral textures marked less by their blend than by their bracing transparency: you could hear the motor mechanisms that kept the piece barreling forward. Conductor Jakob Lehmann (doubling as *primo violino*) kept the energy crackling throughout.

It was no doubt a tribute to the company's preparation process that the singers seemed to be working from a shared understanding of bel canto practice. Nothing was shirked or approximated; each note they sang had meaning and purpose. The work of Argentinian tenor Santiago Ballerini in the title role was a model of the style. His breath control and sure sense of legato allowed him to create long-limned cantabile statements. His firmly supported quiet singing was especially impressive. Ballerini's voice isn't large: in heroic passages, he didn't roar as Corelli did at La Scala. But the trace of steel in his sound made him a thoroughly convincing noble warrior.

Chattanooga-born soprano Chelsea Lehnea took the prima donna role of Paolina. Ideally, the assignment calls for a voice with deeper, darker colors than Lehnea offered here: her sound was essentially lacking in dimension. But even if by nature she is not a dramatic soprano, Lehnea's intelligent use of her slender instrument fulfilled the writing's dramatic potential. The lower-lying portions elicited from her nothing like a traditional chest voice, but she negotiated them with sure projection of text and music. On high, she used her secure upper range to offer a good number of bona fide thrills.

The role of Severo—the work's "heavy"—fell to Ricardo José Rivera. He was at his best in legato passages where his tone acquired intriguing glints of steel; the result was truly beautiful. In louder, more forceful moments, his singing tended toward bluster. But still, the young Puerto Rican baritone truly seemed a star in the making.

Hans Tashjian, as the villainous high priest Callistene, did not have a good showing. Through much of the role, his bass-baritone sounded unfocused: you wondered if the whole thing lay too low for him. But Robert Kleinertz, as *Poliuto's* confidant Nearco, used his slender lyric tenor impeccably. The Italian diction of Teatro Nuovo's chorus fell short of perfection—you heard too many flattened vowel sounds—but its 21 members sang with an impact that belied their numbers.

Ricci rarity

If *Crispino e la Comare* (Crispino and the Fairy), given the following night, was less compelling, the fault lies in the work itself. The 1850 opera, by the brothers Luigi and Federico Ricci, seems like a throwback. Verdi had already written *Luisa Miller*, and *Rigoletto* was to come just a year later, but the style of *Crispino* is closer to Rossini's opera buffas of a quarter-century earlier. The Riccis' music is as energetic as Rossini's, but not as inventive: it seldom catches you by surprise. The work has none of the veins of sentiment that are so integral to Donizetti's *L'elisir d'Amore* or *Don Pasquale*. It does have some effective numbers; in particular, a trio for three buffo basses in Act III and the sparkling waltz song "Io non sono più l'Annetta," which served as a specialty number for Sutherland in her heyday. But its unrelenting air of jauntiness, sustained over its near three-hour length, ultimately proves tiresome.



Italian bass-baritone Mattia Venni [pictured] offered an idiomatic performance of Crispino, the hapless cobbler whose quest for riches, abetted by a fairy godmother, propels the plot. Venni's voice is more compact than the basso buffo norm, and his singing more accurate: every note, no matter how brief, emerging securely focused; the whole borne on crisply articulated text. Moreover, Venni convincingly embodied the Riccis' schlemiel-y Everyman without for a second overplaying the role.

Teresa Castillo brought to the prima donna role of Crispino's wife Annetta an aggressively, unvaryingly bright soprano. The dark, centered mezzo-soprano of Liz Culpepper, playing the "comare," Crispino's magical protector, served as a nice counterweight to the manic action surrounding her. The protagonist's rivals in business are both buffo roles: Dorian McCall as Fabrizio benefited from his freely produced bass-baritone and his

winning stage presence, although he never convinced me that the character was thinking in Italian. Bass Vincent Graña as Mirabolano was more successful in this regard, reveling in the text like a native speaker. Tenor Toby Bradford offered an elegant rendition of the young Contino del Fiore's curtain-raising *romanza*. Conductor and *maestro al cembalo* Jonathan Brandini's reading was hard-driving, but he drew impressive ensemble from his forces.

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