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TEATRO NUOVO's two summer offerings, a much anticipated New York event, took a partial break from its usual *bel canto* fare by presenting a comic opera—a *melodramma fantastico-drammatico*, to be precise—*Crispino e la comare* by the brothers Luigi and Federico Ricci. The half-century between *Don Pasquale* (1843) and *Falstaff* (1893) is widely thought to be a fallow one for Italian comic opera, and the fact that this scarcely remembered work with a libretto by the Verdi collaborator Francesca Maria Piave based on an old Venetian story was probably the most successful work of the timespan would probably reinforce that assessment. But comic opera continued to flourish and, in the view of general and artistic director Will Crutchfield, produced works that repay attention. *Crispino* (seen at the ROSE THEATER on July 20) supplies persuasive evidence of the genre's enduring appeal, even if its musical content and structure point more to the past than to the future.

Like *L'elisir d'amore*, its subject involves health care, but it satirizes more pointedly the medical profession. Crispino, a cobbler unable to support his wife Annetta and children, contemplates suicide but is rescued by a fairy who offers him wealth if he becomes a doctor, promising clandestine support in the performance of his duties. The opera traveled widely following its Venice premiere in 1850, reaching the Metropolitan for a single season (1918-19) when Annetta and Crispino were Frieda Hempel and Antonio Scotti; Patti, Tetrizzini and Galli-Curci also assayed Annetta, attracted, no doubt, by the lilt of its several waltz pieces. Joan Sutherland appropriated the aria 'Io non sono più l'Annetta' as an encore. *Crispino* has had modern revivals, including one at the Valle d'Itria festival in 2013 (December 2013, 1575-6) released by Dynamic on DVD (July 2016, 926-7). After a well crafted second-act finale in which Crispino's apparent medical prowess saves a construction worker from certain death, the work's sparkle dims as his growing conceit makes him unpleasant. Another session with the fairy, however, more stern this time, rights its course on the way to a delightful aria-finale for Annetta.

This season brought a welcome addition to Teatro Nuevo's straightforward stagings, which have generally lacked scenery: projections based on early productions. Those for *Crispino*, in colour, were made from original designs by Adam Thompson based on sets by Pieretto Bianco for the aforementioned Met production. As the lively performance of *Crispino* suggested, such projections enhance Teatro Nuevo's ability to present stagings closer to the spirit of an opera than do full-blown productions with a radical approach. Conducting from a fortepiano, Jonathan Brandani made a strong impression in the capacity of *maestro al cembalo e direttore*, presiding over a zesty account of the score that paid close attention to detail. *Crispino* proved to be a fine work for young singers to demonstrate and hone their *bel canto* skills. In a vibrant performance as Annetta, Teresa Castillo sang with sparkling tone and fluent coloratura. Gaining confidence as the evening progressed, she closed, in lieu of the Riccis' final aria, with a sensational account of Luigi Venzano's *grande valser per coloratura* 'Ah! che assorta', a favourite of Patti, Sembrich and Tetrizzini. As Crispino, the baritone Mattia Venni showed

much promise in a handsomely sung performance that showed good comic sense. Liz Culpepper sang with flair and a hearty mezzo as the fairy. Abigail Lysinger and Tony Bradford sang with pleasant lyricism at the young lovers, Lisette and Contino del Fiore, his aria having the same opening words as Dr. Malatesta's in *Don Pasquale*. Dorian McCall and Vincent Grana did well as Crispino's medical rivals, the latter demonstrating an aptitude for patter in their comic trio with Crispino.

One does not begrudge Castillo's bow to the *aria di baule* tradition with the Venzano aria, a real showpiece, but it should be noted that the aria it replaced is a charming piece, with a touch of Donizettian sentiment, that better suits the opera and brings it to a heartwarming close.

Teatro Nuovo's other opera this year was Donizetti's *Poliuto* given at the Rose Theater on July 19; both it and *Crispino e la comare* had been performed a few days before at Kassas Theater, Montclair State University, New Jersey. For his first work conceived for the Paris Opera, Donizetti followed Rossini's example by composing not a wholly new work but instead revising one of his Italian operas. The choice was an obvious one because the recently (1838) composed *Poliuto*, intended for Naples, went unperformed, having been banned for depicting the martyrdom of a Christian saint, The saint in question is Polyuctus (Poliuto) of Melitene, Armenia, whose marriage (in Salvatore Cammarano's libretto, based on a play by Corneille) to Paolina, daughter of the Roman governor of Armenia, is shaken when her erstwhile lover, Sévère (Severo), believed dead, returns from battle.

Poliuto has been credited for already showing French characteristics, such as the sumptuousness of the act-two finale. It also has a great, cabaletta-driven duet, 'Il suon dell'arpe angeliche', sung as Paolina and Poliuto are about to be fed to the lions, that looks forward to Verdi, especially *La forza del Destino*. For *Les martyrs* (as the French revision was called) Donizetti wrote a wonderful overture, and it is a pleasure to report that, although technically not part of *Poliuto*, it was performed here in a rousing performance by Teatro Nuovo's splendid period-instrument orchestra. It proved a fitting start to an outstanding performance headed by two able young professionals. Chelsea Lehnea's bright soprano thrived in Paolina's music. Her voice may not have a lot of tonal depth, but it is appealingly focused, without sounding shrill, and suits her keen dramatic instincts. Lehnea's singing above the staff was especially exciting. In the cabaletta 'Perché di stolto giubilo' her ornamentation (consistently stylish, as was that of all the singers) took her up to high E and, moments later, high F. But she also demonstrated a capacity to sing expressively, as in the cantabile section of the final duet. As Poliuto, a role written for Adolphe Nourrit but never sung by him, Santiago Ballerini sang with clarity, flexibility and ringing tone. He brought drama to his big aria, 'Fu macchiato l'onore mio' which, like Gabriele Adorno's aria in *Simon Boccanegra*, begins unusually with an agitato section in which the singer is motivated by jealousy, and ends with a lyrical one. Completing the love triangle, Ricardo José Rivera brought a fine, Italianate baritone to Severo, excelling in his aria and earning sympathy in his vain attempt to dissuade Paolina from joining her husband in martyrdom. *Poliuto* too had the benefit of handsome projections, edited reproductions of the designs for *Les martyrs* by several French designers. The conductor Jakob Lehmann, functioning as *primo violino e direttore dell'opera*, brought out the urgency and grandeur of the score. The opera was performed uncut, which may have come as a revelation to those previously familiar only with La Scala's heavily truncated 1960 revival with Maria Callas, Franco Corelli and Ettore Bastianini.

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