

PERFORMANCE

Tito's triumph

Robert Harris finds brilliance in the COC's provocative staging of Mozart's final opera

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OPERA REVIEW

Imperfect, sure, but not to be missed

Despite some baffling moves by the director, the COC's staging of Mozart's last opera features superb singing from a wonderful cast

La Clemenza di Tito
The Canadian Opera Company
Directed by Christopher Alden
At the Four Seasons Centre
in Toronto on Sunday

REVIEWED BY
ROBERT HARRIS

By and large, there were two *La Clemenza di Titos* presented on the stage of Toronto's Four Seasons Centre on Sunday afternoon – the one Mozart and his librettist, Caterino Mazzola, wrote; and the one that Christopher Alden directed. The one that Mozart wrote was performed with remarkable vocal beauty by a wonderful cast that the COC's Alexander Neef assembled for this production, which included Michael Schade, up and coming Met star Isabel Leonard, the fine young Canadian soprano Wallis Giunta, Keri Alkema, Mireille Asselin and Robert Gleadow. Almost to a recitative, they were all in fine voice.

The problem all of them had all afternoon was that they had to choose which side of the production they were on – Mozart's or Alden's. When they picked the composer, we experienced some wonderful operatic moments. When they picked, or were forced onto, the side of the director, less so.

Mozart's *Tito*, his last opera, was composed in the sad, desperate, last year of the composer's life, the year that saw *The Magic Flute* and the *Requiem*, but also the exquisite and tragic miniatures that poured out of him, the choral *Ave verum corpus* and pieces he wrote for glass harmonica and mechanical organ. *Tito* may not be Mozart's greatest work, but nothing written in those months is unrewarding, and the opera is full of musical epiphanies. The story of *Tito* is one of mercy – sort of an opera-length version of Portia's soliloquy on the subject from *The Merchant of Venice*. Faced with an assassination attempt and betrayal by his friend, Sesto, *Tito* decides to rain forgiveness on his head, rather than pain.



Michael Schade, rear, with Isabel Leonard in *La Clemenza di Tito*, a production that received both boos and applause. MICHAEL COOPER

And saves his own soul at the same time. In Mozart's hands, a powerful story.

But Christopher Alden made two decisions that compromised Mozart's work. In the first place, he decided that *Tito's* clemency was something of a ruse, a manipulative technique to control the people around him. Not an impossible interpretation. But Alden, especially in *Tito's* first act, also decided to add a bevy of comic effects to the story, which completely undermined it. Performers were forced to act and sing different meanings all afternoon.

The performer who seemed to deal with this the most successfully was Isabel Leonard as Sesto, her debut in this role. Leonard has a pure, expressive voice but is also a fine actress, both vocally and on stage, and her Sesto transfigured the dynamics of the pro-

duction every time she assumed centre stage. Her *Parto, parto*, one of the opera's most famous arias, was riveting, as was her confrontation with *Tito* in Act 2. Leonard hasn't mastered all of Sesto's psychology yet, but she portrayed a rich character struggling with complex motivations with real power.

And if Leonard was most successful in dealing with Alden's interpretative take, the performer least successful was Wallis Giunta as Annio. This is not a knock on Giunta. She is a wonderful singer, and her touching Act 2 aria, *Tardi s'avvede...*, almost stole the show. But Alden decided to play Annio, especially in the opera's first half, for laughs, as a headbanded, jogging, Avril Lavigne-style "sk8ter boi," and the character, and the production, never really recovered. This is a chamber opera in many ways, with each character

fulfilling an essential dramatic role. Take one out, and the structure teeters.

In the middle between Leonard and Giunta were Keri Alkema's Vitellia and Michael Schade's *Tito*. Vitellia is the former emperor's daughter, enraged at not having been chosen to be *Tito's* wife, who in the opera pushes Sesto, her lover, into his treasonous acts. She should be a woman consumed with passion – and when Alkema delivered that passion, she was brilliant, mesmerizing. When, however, she played Vitellia as a conniving, out-of-control harpy, even her vocal beauty couldn't save her. We were just confused. Schade has played *Tito* many times, and approaches his Emperor as a man torn by fear, self-doubt, distress – a man on the edge. With beautiful singing, Schade managed to find a middle way between Mozart's forgiving

Tito and Alden's crafty one, to create a bravura performance.

Daniel Cohen led the COC Orchestra in the pit, and, I thought, was a bit more on Alden's side of the production than Mozart's. Tempos were brisk, phrases that might have been shaped with more beauty just flew by. The vocalists, I thought, might have been given a bit more support in finding the emotional depth in the music.

This was not a perfect production (the mixing of applause and boos at its conclusion on Sunday was proof of that), but opera is better when it provokes, for whatever reason. There are too many fine performances here to ignore. You'll be sorry if you miss them.

La Clemenza di Tito runs until Feb. 22.

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