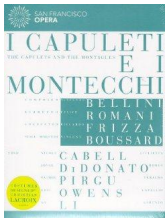
Vincenzo Bellini - I Capuleti e I Montecchi (San Francisco 2012)



1. Act I 2. Act II Joyce DiDonato (Mezzo Soprano) - Romeo Nicole Cabell (Soprano) - Giulietta Saimir Pirgu (Tenor) - Tebaldo Eric Owens (Baritone) - Capellio Ao Li (Bass Baritone) San Francisco Opera Orchestra, San Francisco Opera Chorus Riccardo Frizza - conductor

Vincenzo Bellinis bel canto masterpiece I Capuleti e i Montecchi, inspired by the tragic tale of Romeo and Juliet, is what The New York Times calls an opera of definite dramatic appeal. Joyce DiDonato, winner of the Grammy Award and the ECHO Klassik, and Nicole Cabell as the ill-fated lovers Romeo and Giulietta headline a cast of international stars. Directed by Vincent Boussard in his U.S. debut and led by returning conductor and bel canto specialist Riccardo Frizza, this new co-production has sets created by French opera, theater and dance designer Vincent Lemaire. The production also features stunning costumes by renowned fashion designer Christian Lacroix, a frequent collaborator with Mr. Boussard and a prominent fashion icon known for both his couture house as well as his theater, ballet and opera costumes.
---Editorial Reviews, Rovi

There have been several fine audio-only performances of this, Bellini’s Romeo and Juliet story, with casts that include Elina Garanca and Anna Netrebko, Vesselina Kasarova and Eva Mei, Agnes Baltsa and Edita Gruberova, Janet Baker and Beverly Sills, and Jennifer Larmore and Hei-Kyong Hong. However, before the one under consideration here, there was only one video version, from the Martina Franca Festival starring Patrizia Ciofi and Clara Polito. Highly polished singing from Ciofi did not make up for the casting of a soprano Romeo, and the production itself

was rather a mess. In other words, the DVD field was wide open for this set, recorded live in San Francisco in October, 2012.

I dare say that were this audio only, it might be a front-runner, so fine is the singing of the two principals and so idiomatic and exciting the conducting. And by default it is the best video, despite the fact that director Vincent Boussard–along with Vincent Lemaire (sets) and no less than Christian Lacroix (costumes)–do everything they can to alienate the audience. You sense instant trouble from the opening curtain: Hanging from the ceiling, and at first mistaken for stage lighting, are dozens of saddles; nowhere to be seen or sensed are horses. Everyone is in identical (more or less) black/gray trousers, coats, and jauntily tied cravats/scarves, circa the mid-19th century, heaven-knows-where, all wearing stove-pipe top hats as well. The playing area is wide but shallow; the walls are lacquered, unadorned red or black, with occasional abstract formations showing up. Romeo enters, similarly dressed (I believe his top hat is even higher than most, and his shirt is whiter); the Capulets walk off stage while he is singing and return a few moments later.

One can tolerate the silliness and abstraction until Scene 2, in Giulietta's bedroom. Wearing a sort of flouncy evening gown that she grips to her white bodice, it falls off when her grip loosens–I wonder why. But wait–her room is a continuation of the lacquered walls, only now they are a bright, shiny golden color, and so is the reflecting floor, so we can't tell where walls end and floor begins. But wait–the only prop in the room is a white, porcelain sink, which Giulietta climbs into in order to sing her opening aria. Romeo enters for their duet and the pair sings mostly without approaching one-another, what with Giulietta literally climbing the walls and all.

So, we begin to understand: Giulietta is crazy, imprisoned both in her mind and by her family, and Romeo can't quite get to her. Not good enough for such ugliness, I must admit. Later, the wedding scene features bleachers (in a picture frame) upon which sit the guests, the (non-singing) women in ugly, over-decorated, multi-colored crinoline dresses, each with a flower in her mouth. Romeo turns out to be one of them–he drops his dress and spits out his flower before beginning to sing.

But just listen to the pair of lovers. Nicole Cabell, acting up a storm and giving meaning to every word, sings ravishingly and sadly as Giulietta, spinning out Bellini's long lines, with a voice somewhat grander than we normally hear in this music. This does not allow for great feats of added coloratura, but we get the notes as written, with some embellishments, and a gorgeous trill to boot, all delivered in luxurious tone. And of course, all of this while holding her dress up, balancing herself on a sink, or singing to the back wall.

Romeo may be Joyce DiDonato's greatest role–greatest among many greats–her figure, range, and exclamatory style being ideal for the impetuous youth. She strides onto the set as if she owns it, and indeed she does, pouring out reams of handsome mezzo sound in perfect legato and diction and with thrilling decoration, always at the service of the text and character. You can ignore a certain wiry tremolo on sustained notes about G. Her duets with Cabell touch the heart, in unison, in thirds, in counterpoint. This is some of Bellini's saddest music–from a catalog of ineffably sad music–and it speaks directly to the emotions. "Weep, shudder, die," indeed.

Tenor Saimir Pirgu's Tebaldo is delivered with earnestness, passion, and a few interpolated high notes that at times are in danger of breaking up. That he and Romeo are asked to simulate a duel in Act 2 while walking on a thin beam (or a tightrope–it's hard to figure out) is a puzzle that remains unsolved. Eric Owens seems at sea in a role as unfulfilling as Capellio, his remarkable bass voice somewhat wasted and his lack of acting clearly another idea of the director's. On the other hand, Ao Li's Lorenzo, sympathetically sung, is asked to act up a storm. The chorus moves in blocks, but sings magnificently.

Riccardo Frizza is clearly a fine bel canto conductor. His reading of the overture is frenzied, but this is clearly to get our attention; thereafter, this is pure beauty. He phrases with the singers, and while allowing plenty of rubato and embellishments, he never misrepresents Bellini's beautiful, long lines. The orchestra plays the music with warmth and accuracy. I guess there's irresistibility to watching a soprano in a sink, but after one viewing you'll just have to close your eyes and listen to two spectacular women's voices, making I Capuleti come alive.--- Robert Levine, ClassicsToday.com, arkivmusic.com

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