



La Cenerentola, Spoleto does right by Rossini with its hilariously beautiful production

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A happy alliance of terrific musicians and stagecraft wizards came together Friday evening at the Gaillard Auditorium to bring this year's Spoleto Festival USA production of Gioacchino Rossini's comic masterpiece, *La Cenerentola*, to sprightly and side-splitting life.

Next to *The Barber of Seville*, this is Rossini's most famous opera buffa, and in some ways, it's even the funnier of the two. It gives a good cast countless chances for creative comedy as well as potent social satire targeting the era's royal establishment. Remember, comic opera and theater were just about the only ways you could get away with roasting the aristocracy back in Rossini's day.

It's also opera of the Italian *bel canto* ("beautiful singing") ilk, meaning rich vocal tone, smooth phrasing, and beastly difficult *coloratura* demands. And said demands apply to all vocal types, from growly basses to stratospheric sopranos. Everybody gets their crack at florid vocal runs and bouncy ornamentation. You simply don't get to sing this kind of opera unless you've got an exceptionally flexible and agile voice.

La Cenerentola is the classic Cinderella fairy tale, only without the pumpkin, glass slipper, or fairy godmother. Angelina, the heroine, indeed gets her coach-ride to the royal palace and a sort of sparkly ID bracelet instead of a slipper. Her wise benefactor, Alidoro, is a fairy godfather of sorts. He's the mystical tutor to Don Ramiro, our handsome prince. Oh, and there's another comic twist to the plot. Ramiro's zany valet, Dandini, switches places with his boss in order to put the royal bridal choices to the test. Don Magnifico is the social-climbing stepfather, with Clorinda and Tisbe as empty-headed rather than evil stepsisters.

Musically, all went swimmingly. The Spoleto Festival Orchestra's players sounded crisp and juicy, even from the pit. Their rendition of the catchy overture was a treat. The mellifluous men of the Westminster Choir formed the smooth and rich-sounding male chorus. Conductor Matteo Beltrami, already a well-seasoned opera maestro at age 32, imparted irresistible lilt and sparkle to the score, while holding things together very nicely. There were only a few fleeting moments of rhythmic disconnect between singers and orchestra.

The lead singers gave no real cause for complaint, either. As the title character, mezzo-soprano Sandra Piques Eddy looked great and sounded even better. She proved to be a brilliant vocal acrobat, with strength and even tone in all parts of her broad range (though it took her awhile to fully warm up her lower end). Victor Ryan Robertson, playing her hero Don Ramiro, was handsome both in body and voice: a near-ideal Rossini tenor (they're a special breed).

Paolo Pecchioli excelled in the mostly solemn role of Alidoro, offering perhaps the most skillful *coloratura* singing among the lower male voices.

Soprano Jennifer Check (Clorinda) and mezzo Laura Vlasak Nolen (Tisbe) were the evening's most convincing clowns, hamming it up with more hilarious physical slapstick than just about anybody else, and their singing shone, too. Nolen managed some of the funniest bodily postures I've ever seen in opera. Baritone Tim Nolen, as Don Magnifico, also got countless chances to make us guffaw, with both his sure comedic instincts and his occasional silly falsetto tones. Fellow baritone Bruno Taddia (Dandini) played his prince-for-a-day role to the hilt.

The remaining staging tasks were beautifully handled, thanks to the thorough efforts of Director Charles Robaud and his production team. Rumors of a pre-performance costume crisis were a-flying, even as recently as last Wednesday's dress rehearsal. But they must've straightened things out, because Katia Dufлот's period dress scheme seemed well-planned and consistent — except maybe for the stepsisters' outlandish outfits.

Props and set design, courtesy of Emmanuelle Favre, were effective, alternating between the genteel decay of Don Magnifico's digs and the glitter of Don Ramiro's palace. Vladimir Lukasevich's lighting design also served the production well. A fresh comedic dimension came with Gilles Papain's video design, which added intermittent "slideshows" to the action via a large central screen. His apparent blend of animation, photos and live video made for something new and different, at least in my experience. A team of mute, mime-like clowns added a French twist to the action.

This production couldn't have been more different than Anthony Davis's *Amistad*, the festival's other major opera. Unlike Davis, Rossini never asks us to think or reflect on weighty issues here. All he meant for us to do is to revel in his bubbly music and laugh a lot. And that's just exactly what we did.