

## **Cinderella opera has fairy-tale richness**

*Steven Brown*

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When the Spoleto Festival USA turns to operas that are at least semi-familiar, it usually looks at them from new angles. It has given us Romeo and Juliet as members of warring crime families and, another year, as children of rival funeral-home operators. Even when the results aren't totally convincing, they're thought-provoking.

But the festival is taking a holiday with "Cenerentola," Gioacchino Rossini's Italian-opera version of the Cinderella story. Spoleto's Cinderella remains in her long-ago, fairy-tale time. The prince is a prince. The palace is a palace. The glass slipper is a bracelet, but that's Rossini's doing: In the early 1800s, when he was at work, women didn't bare their feet onstage.

Spoleto sticks with Rossini on the bracelet and most everything else. It lets the music's sparkle and the story's sweetness work their spell as they have for generations.

Sandra Piques Eddy is a Cinderella whose goodness comes through from the very start, simply in the grace she bestows on the little song that introduces her. As Cinderella blossoms in the face of good fortune, Eddy's rich voice and ready smile radiate far into Gaillard Auditorium. Playing Ramiro, the prince, Victor Ryan Robertson sings with the same vigor and ring that he brought to Opera Carolina's recent production of Mozart's "Don Giovanni." When the prince vows that he'll track down the mystery woman from his party, Robertson leaves no doubt that he means business.

If there's one unusual stroke, it's to have a light baritone -- Timothy Nolen -- rather than a booming bass as Cinderella's increasingly exasperated father. What his music may lose in cannon-shot impact, though, it mostly gains back from Nolan's comic pizzazz. Stage director Charles Roubaud has injected everyone who surrounds Cinderella and Ramiro with that same flair for hijinks. Whether it's a battalion of scribes taking dictation in sync or Ramiro's valet getting carried away with masquerading as the prince, Roubaud finds fun everywhere. The singers don't always have a grip on the vocal gymnastics that correspond to such things, but that's almost a lost art nowadays.

Designer Emmanuelle Favre enhances the fairy-tale aura with her sets -- especially Ramiro's elegant palace, which keeps revealing new chambers as scenes unfold. The fantasy grows even richer thanks to video designer Gilles Papain. When Ramiro's mentor, Alidoro -- Rossini's equivalent of the fairy godmother -- invokes Ramiro's palace and coach, they appear for all to see. And conductor Matteo Beltrami keeps the music winging along.

### **Chamber-music concerts**

While "Cenerentola" takes its familiar form, Spoleto's daily chamber-music concerts -- perennially among its most popular events -- have undergone a transformation. Their home, the venerable but frail Dock Street Theatre, is closed for a two-year restoration. So the concerts have moved to the Memminger Auditorium, a Depression-era theater that has been revamped after suffering the ravages of time and Hurricane Hugo. The old stage and seats are gone, and the space they occupied is now an open, black-box theater -- well, a black box made of red brick. During the series' opening Friday, the murmur of the air-conditioning system competed with the music's quiet spots. But when Spoleto's chamber players let fly with Erno Dohnanyi's Sextet -- which harkens back to luxurious music of Richard Strauss and Johannes Brahms -- the opulence filled the auditorium. As a refuge for two years, Memminger will work. Music.