

Monday, Aug. 01, 2011

OPERA REVIEW

Der Vampyr a 'rollicking good time'

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Der Vampyr

An opera in 2 acts by Heinrich Marschner
Festival de Lanaudière
Festival Orchestra & Chorus Jean-Marie Zeitouni conducting
Amphithéâtre Fernand-Lindsay, Joliette, Québec

Heinrich who? Marschner – Heinrich Marschner – a man who played a significant role in shaping German opera but whose works are now rarely performed. As the New Penguin Opera Guide put it: “only the three operas most widely acclaimed during Marschner’s lifetime survive on the fringes of today’s repertoire”.

The Festival de Lanaudière bravely went about unearthing and resurrecting one of the three: Der Vampyr – first performed in Leipzig in the spring of 1828. It’s rare that the festival stages a concert version of an opera. The temptations to go with Marschner’s The Vampire are obvious. First of all the music: The score is a delight. Marschner is often cited as the bridge between Weber and Wagner. A relatively early work, Marschner was 31 when he began to work on the opera in 1826; it combines a classical balance and elegance with the chromatic effects he so deftly uses to explore character and angst in this gothic tale of an aristocratic vampire stalking the Scottish highlands. Second, well, why not capitalize on the current pop culture frenzy on the living dead? And third, there is a raft of vocal talent who now grace stages across North America and Europe, and who were once members of the Atelier Lyrique de l’Opéra de Montréal – potential brand recognition. Der Vampyr is a great vehicle to show some of them off.

The result was a thoroughly enjoyable evening of lovely music under the stars in a creatively directed concert staging. Unfortunately it was not a sell: The amphitheatre was barely half full, and the lawn stretching up from it sparsely peopled. Interestingly, though, there were more families with kids than usual and while a few gave up, the ones that stayed seemed to be thrilled. At intermission you could overhear boisterous chat comparing operatic vampires to the TV and cinema kind.

This is probably due to Philip Addis’ stunning performance as Lord Ruthven, the vampire. The handsome Addis, who resides in Stratford with his wife and son, has a richly coloured baritone voice and the physical stature to play a convincingly gaunt, yet powerful villain. It is a daunting role with a demanding first act aria. Frédéric Antoun, of Montreal, sang a noble romantic hero despite a second act cough that, remarkably, didn’t seem to affect his singing. They were ably balanced by sopranos Marianne Fiset, the daughter of Sir Davenaut who is set to wed Ruthven, not knowing his ghoulish nature, and Nathalie Paulin, as Emmy who unfortunately succumbs to Ruthven’s allure and becomes one of the undead.

Bass Robert Pomakov sang a strong Sir Humphrey Davenaut.

A striking element of the work is the complexly beautiful harmonies Marschner uses in the ensemble singing of the duets, trios and quartets.

Jean-Marie Zeitouni, who is well known to Montreal symphony and opera audiences as a conductor, and is in ever greater demand abroad, exacted crisp performances from the orchestra and chorus. There were some unfortunate moments from the brass – but not enough to really matter – and the choruses took a bit of time to gel. Alain Gauthier and Alexis Rivest did a fine job setting the action within the constraints of performing on stage with the band. All in all, a rollicking good time; too bad it was a one-night stand. It could do well with a longer run.

Special to The Globe and Mail