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Sunday, August 18, 2013

Opera Review: She Just Can't Wait to Be Queen**Dell'Arte Opera Ensemble mounts *L'Incoronazione di Poppea***by [Paul J. Pelkonen](#)

Passion in the palace: Nerone (Alison Taylor Chessman, left) macks on Poppea (Greer Davis) in Dell'Arte Opera Ensemble's *L'Incoronazione di Poppea*.
Photo by Brian Long © 2013 Dell'Arte Opera Ensemble.

The Dell'Arte Opera Ensemble took a major chance with this year's Summer Repertoire Project, pushing into the deep waters of Renaissance opera with its first production of Claudio Monteverdi's 1642 masterpiece *L'Incoronazione di Poppea*. Although it is the last of Monteverdi's works for the Venetian stage, *Poppea* is a milestone opera in that it was the *first* opera to portray actual historical figures on the stage instead of mythological or allegorical figures.

This production, at the E. 13th Street Theater, used Spartan sets and minimal production values to depict the majesty of Ancient Rome. With these simple visuals, a successful performance rode on the voices. In Monteverdi operas, the very novelty of the operatic form meant that each aria or ensemble broke new musical ground. The whole cast seemed aware of the imminence and importance of performing *this* particular opera. It helps that the libretto is a red-blooded reversal of history that presents the ignoble Poppea and Nero as the heroes of the day.

Victoria Crutchfield's direction blended modern sensibilities, steampunk style and a hint of Roman decadence to create a representational Roman setting that was effective despite the shoe-string budget. A rolling set of curtains and a tiled mosaic (covered and uncovered by changeable floor surfaces) served as a central acting surface. The show's prologue and epilogue (featuring the "contest" between the gods of Fortune, Virtue

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Running scared: Orestes (Mikhail Vekua) flees the furies in Act III of Tanayev's opera. Photo by Corey Weaver © 2013 Bard SummerScape.

Recordings Review: Cecilia Bartoli sings *Norma*.

The mezzo diva sings 'Casta diva.' Photo by Uli Weber © 2013 Decca Classics/UMG


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NPR

After new contract negotiations failed, the orchestra musicians were locked out by management in October 2012, and the orchestra's situation seems to be growing more dire by the week. The orchestra's 2013 summer season was canceled, and the ...

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Familiarity, they say, breeds contempt. But that maxim, however hoary, is not unassailable. Audiences for concerts of mainstream orchestral repertoire have not yet grown tired of Tchaikovsky's showy, songful Violin Concerto in D, composed in 1878 and ...

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A full list of dates is below, but it's worth noting here that a number of the stops will feature not only the stylings of Dan The Automator, Del The Funky Homosapien, Kid Koala, and a three-piece backing band, but also an accompanying 16-piece orchestra.
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New York Times
Dell'Arte Opera (Friday through Sunday) This ensemble, a valuable source of performing experience for young artists, is staging two operas set in ancient Rome this summer. Monteverdi's "Incoronazione di Poppea" (Friday and Sunday) is directed by ...

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Like last year's schedule,

and Love that drives the plot forward) were staged as a mini-audience before the opera, with the opera's actual characters drawn from the little crowd and pulled deep into the story.

This fine cast of young singers was led by soprano Greer Davis in the title role, a Roman noblewoman whose torrid affair with the Emperor Nero (Alison Taylor Cheeseman) leads to her elevation to the position of Empress of Rome. Ms. Davis' small but pleasant soprano proved pliant, capable of intimate intertwinings with Nero in one scene and flights of vocal ornamentation in key moments. Ms. Cheeseman was an edgy Nero, depicting a hint of the emperor's legendary instability (even sniffing cocaine at one point in the show) while melting to butter in the presence of Poppea.

The intent and purpose of Dell'Arte's summer program is to provide young artists with a six-month opera boot camp in which to hone their musical, acting and diction skills. But the cast for Poppea had its share of known artists too. Chief among these was countertenor Jeffery Mandelbaum, who has found a way off of the Metropolitan Opera's *Enchanted Island* to appear in this show. As Ottone, his voice had a clear, sweet tone that caressed the ear, important in the Act II scenes when the character performed a long (and frequently cut) monologue. Drusilla was played by soprano Rachel Barker, a *coquette* who came into her own in the last act.

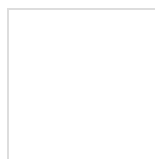
In the smaller roles, the finest performance came from towering bass Hans Tashjian as Seneca, the Roman senator and philosopher whose opposition to Nero leads to self-slaughter in the bathtub. His Act I and II scenes displayed a firm, resonant instrument and a gravid stage presence that led weight to this historically significant philosopher and author. Katherine Howell played Octavia, Nero's *first* Empress. Her jealousy of Poppea leads to the opera's murder plot. Ms. Howell is an operatic heroine in the making, with a sweet tone and compelling stage presence.

The singers were helped by taut ensemble playing from conductor Jeffery Grossman and The Sebastians, a period chamber ensemble. With just a few instruments, (and Mr. Grossman doubling on harpsichord and electric organ, The Sebastians conveyed the majesty and complexity of Monteverdi's score. In that small space, it was refreshing to hear the orchestral details of cello, theorbo and violins emerge and twine with the voices, as the instruments commented on the action or simply supported the singers' line. Although there were some cuts, the work was played at a generally fast, yet precise tempo, compressing the action effectively and never losing the show's dramatic sensibility.

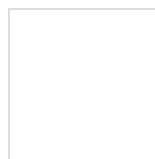
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the San Francisco Opera's fall lineup comprises a mere five operas, one commissioned world premiere alongside multiple performances of standard-rep works that testify to the company's still-tightened purse strings. Among the ...

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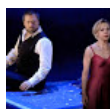
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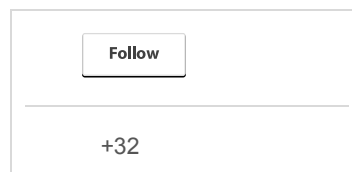
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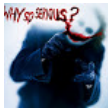
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