

January 17, 2010

A Space Opera in a Proper Galaxy

By MATTHEW GUREWITSCH

IN 2001 Gotham Chamber Opera opened its doors at the Abrons Arts Center on the Lower East Side of Manhattan with what was billed as the American stage premiere of the teenage [Mozart](#)'s moral allegory "Il Sogno di Scipione," set in the Temple of Heaven. Now, after nine years spent establishing a repertory of rarities from [Monteverdi](#) to Piazzolla, the company is preparing its next space adventure. The vehicle this time is Haydn's comedy "Il Mondo Della Luna" ("The World on the Moon"), to be presented, with unassailable if quixotic logic, in the [Hayden Planetarium](#) at the [American Museum of Natural History](#) beginning on Tuesday evening.

As you may expect, the world on the moon is a place in a patsy's mind. The gullible Gulliver who gets taken there is the elderly Buonafede, who starts out with buckets of money, two marriageable daughters to tyrannize and a mercenary maid who wraps him around her little finger. He also has a personal astronomer, Ecclitico, through whose spyglass he glimpses titillating lunar shenanigans. (A young woman pleasures an old man; a husband canes his wife; an abused mistress pleads with her lover for mercy.) Deposited back on earth in the third act, Buonafede has only his memories of his fake adventure. The youngsters have made matches to suit themselves, siphoning off generous dowries besides. Yet with little ado, Buonafede comes round, and for the moment all's right with the world.

Neal Goren, the founding artistic director of Gotham Chamber Opera, set his sights on "Il Mondo Della Luna" long ago. "We couldn't do it at our original theater because the pit is too small," Mr. Goren said during a break in late December at a soaring rehearsal studio in Brooklyn, where daylight and neon mingled in an unearthly glare. "For a while I was looking for an empty warehouse or other raw space. Then I took my nephew to the planetarium one day, and it came to me: Bingo! Why not here?"

Why not? Because the idea was off the wall. As any visitor to the planetarium can plainly see, it lacks every basic feature of an [opera](#) house. Mr. Goren was understandably shy about taking the idea to Diane Paulus, a seasoned opera director known for pop hits like "The Donkey Show" and the current revival of "Hair." When he did, she bought in right away.

"I thought it was a stroke of genius," Ms. Paulus said. Apart from that heavenly dome, the facility had a whole library of starry video material to play with, not to mention the Zeiss Universarium, an obsolete piece of astronomical projection equipment that was simply too eye-catching not to build into the show. Two years ago Mr. Goren and Ms. Paulus met with Ellen V. Futter, president of the American Museum of Natural History, who greeted their proposition with an open mind.

"This is an exciting moment in our culture," Ms. Paulus said. "I love it that we're starting to look at each other across institutions, really thinking out of the box." Mr. Goren jumped in: "Doing this opera at the planetarium is a

perfect way to marry arts and science. And it's not a gimmick. I won't say this is easy, but we're a can-do company."

After Mr. Goren had tested the acoustics, using a singer and a flute, the team started dealing with the hard stuff.

No orchestra pit? No problem. The 25 instrumentalists will play on an elevated platform.

No stage? No problem. Stagehands will assemble a playing area at the empty center of the auditorium. And much of the action will unfold overhead, as the players scramble on rolling ladders.

Lights? Hmm. Conventional theatrical lamps were out of the question. For one thing, they would not fit. For another, they would bleach the montage of video projections from the planetarium archive, which were to anchor Philip Bussmann's production design. So Ted Southern, artist and inventor, was recruited to build lighting into the costumes, which Anka Lupes had conceived with just such enhancement in mind. (In November, as if to confirm Mr. Southern's qualifications, his new space glove for astronauts won the \$100,000 second prize in the 2009 [NASA](#) Astronaut Glove Challenge.)

But production values and logistics are not everything. In December, when "Il Mondo Della Luna" played to delighted audiences at the Theater an der Wien in Vienna, in a nimble staging by Tobias Moretti, it was a passage of pure sound that made the most lasting impression. The swirling strains to which the deluded Buonafede lifted off (in a suspended deck chair) were spun to such gossamer fineness that it was impossible to tell what instruments were playing (the exotic glass harmonica, perhaps, with an added wisp of flute?) or where in the theater the musicians — Concentus Musicus Wien, led by the early-music pioneer [Nikolaus Harnoncourt](#) — were deployed (somewhere in the wings?).

After the show Mr. Harnoncourt solved the riddle. "Those were the 16 violins playing from their chairs in the orchestra, triple piano, with wooden mutes," he said. "Not the modern synthetic mutes people use today, if they use mutes at all. Players are lazy and think it's enough just to play very softly. But when composers write 'con sordino' — 'with mute' — they want a very particular, different sound. Conductors now are happy just to see something black on the violin. I don't think you'll hear a triple piano like you heard tonight anywhere else in the world. The idea was just to hear quivering air."

Nor was such acoustic legerdemain the evening's only astonishment. In the second-act finale, when Buonafede is tricked into giving away his daughters to suitors of their own choosing, the mood suddenly intensified in ways that recalled the thrilling first-act finale of Mozart's "Don Giovanni." But "Don Giovanni" was not written until 1787, a full decade after the premiere of "Il Mondo Della Luna."

Much as we like to think of the broadly scaled finales of "Le Nozze di Figaro," "Don Giovanni" and "Così Fan Tutte" as Mozart's invention, "Il Mondo Della Luna" and other neglected operas show that Haydn was there first. But the world at large ignored those works even then. Virtually all his most ambitious operas were written for the remote summer residence of the princes Esterhazy, where Haydn served for decades as court composer. Could Mozart still have mimicked him?

"Yes, absolutely," Mr. Harnoncourt said. "Mozart knew Haydn's operas in detail. Mozart and Haydn were the closest of friends. They visited in Vienna. Of course they showed each other their scores."

Mr. Goren, of Gotham, has been struck by another parallel. To his ear the aria “Ragion nell’alma siede” (“Reason rules the soul”), sung by Buonafede’s high-strung daughter Flaminia, anticipates the stirring “Martern aller Arten” (“Tortures of every kind”) from “Die Entführung aus dem Serail,” an opera Mozart started in 1781. “Both arias are in C major,” Mr. Goren pointed out, “and they’re in the same heroic style, with wide intervals and bravura runs. The context of the operas is comic, but these arias are in the grand manner, as if they’d been dropped in from a tragedy.”

True, Mozart had mastered this style as a teenager, and “Martern aller Arten” is ennobled, as Flaminia’s *pièce de résistance* is not, by blazing interludes for solo flute, oboe, violin and cello. Yet such quibbles hardly undermine the general point, made by Mr. Goren in a program note, that “Il Mondo Della Luna,” though uneven, contains some of Haydn’s “most varied and stupendous music.”

“This is not only the best of Haydn,” he writes, “this is the best of music.”

The Gotham Chamber Opera version unabashedly skims the cream off the top, reducing the score to a swift 100 minutes with no intermission. The Vienna edition, with minor cuts and an intermission, flew by in three and a quarter hours, thanks greatly to the baritone Dietrich Henschel as Buonafede, who climbed scaffolds on the set with the agility of a monkey, battled the revolving stage as [Charlie Chaplin](#) did the machinery of “Modern Times” and stripped for a bubble bath in full view of the audience. Who will carry the show at the planetarium remains to be seen. Marco Nisticò, the Buonafede, delivered a winning comic turn in the title role of Rossini’s “Signor Bruschino” with Gotham in 2007. In rehearsal the tenor Nicholas Coppolo, as Ecclitico, sparkled with high spirits. But another front-runner would have to be the Russian soprano Albina Shagimuratova, in demand everywhere as the Queen of the Night in Mozart’s “Magic Flute,” cast here as Flaminia.

Musical and musicological considerations aside, “Il Mondo Della Luna” has the advantage of a libretto adapted from Goldoni, creator of the indestructible “Arlecchino, Servant of Two Masters.” Trappings may change, but the essential human dynamics of farce do not.

“‘Il Mondo Della Luna’ is totally like sitcom,” Ms. Paulus, the director, said. “Clarice, Buonafede’s flightier daughter, tells her sister it’s O.K. with her if the man she marries is kind of a space cadet. If he has his head in the stars, she can do what she wants. It’s pure ‘[Sex and the City](#).’ You can have your cake and eat it too.”

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