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Boston Midsummer Opera revives 'Martha'



CHRIS MCKENZIE

By **Jeffrey Gantz** GLOBE CORRESPONDENT JULY 30, 2015

Anchored by the folk tune to which Thomas Moore set “The Last Rose of Summer,” Friedrich von Flotow’s romantic comedy “Martha, or the Market at Richmond” debuted in Vienna in 1847 and soon spread all over Europe. Enrico Caruso sang in early 20th-century productions at the Met; thereafter, however, “Martha” fell out of favor and is hardly ever seen today. Boston Midsummer Opera’s enjoyable revival at the Tsai Performance Center will make you wonder why.

The production is presented in English rather than the original German, and that’s appropriate given that the opera is set in England, in 1710. One of Queen Anne’s maids of honor, Lady Harriet (Joanna Mongiardo), is bored with court life and elderly suitors like her cousin Sir Tristan (David Cushing). For a lark, she and her maid Nancy (Stephanie Kacoyanis) dress up as servant girls and hire themselves out to the hiring fair

at Richmond, west of London, where, calling themselves Martha and Julia, they sign up with farmers Lionel (Eric Barry) and Plunkett (Jason Budd). The ladies think it's a joke; then they learn they've entered into a binding one-year contract. Their plight grows worse when their masters discover that the new servants can neither cook nor sew nor tend geese.

That doesn't stop Lionel from falling for Harriet and Plunkett for Nancy. So now the ladies have both a legal predicament and a romantic embarrassment — but are they really embarrassed by the attentions of these handsome young men? And if Lady Harriet can hardly marry a commoner, the libretto by Friedrich Wilhelm Riese finds a solution to that difficulty as well. The libretto is in fact full of clever wordplay, like the tongue twisters with which the servant girls advertise their skills, and much of it survives in BMO's translation, like Molly Pitt's "I can sew, sir, / Like a pro, sir! / I am nimble / With a thimble."

Unfortunately, not much of the libretto is intelligible in this production. There are no supertitles, and the singers don't enunciate particularly well, so it's a good idea to read the program synopsis ahead of time. But even without words, you'll laugh when Harriet and Nancy insist that Tristan, who's going to the fair as "Sir Bob," learn to polka, or when Lionel and Plunkett try to teach the ladies to spin wool. And this "Martha" is beautifully sung, from Harriet's "The Last Rose of Summer" and Lionel's sublime aria "One Lovely Night" to Plunkett's "Porter Song" in praise of English beer. (There was also a salute to beer in BMO's 2014 presentation, Smetana's "The Bartered Bride.") The voices blend nicely, whether in duets or in the tender "Good Night Quartet."

The acting is more variable. Kacoyanis and Budd make an enticing comic/romantic pair as Nancy and Plunkett; it's too bad Nancy's "Huntress fair" is cut from this production. Cushing, in a wig that looks like a baby bonnet, makes for a delightfully foppish Sir Tristan, but Barry is over-earnest as the lovelorn Lionel, and Mongiardo seems arch and a little inexpressive next to Kacoyanis.

James O'Leary's staging is quietly serviceable. The attractive set from Stephen Dobay is built around a backdrop of large diamond shapes that, lit this way and that by John Cuff, suggest both court and country. The pair of huge fuchsia sunflowers framing Richmond Market is an especially nice touch. Elisabetta Polito's costumes are true to the period; there's no unwelcome updating. And the 21-piece orchestra gives a spirited performance under Susan Davenny Wyner. The production, with minor cuts, runs a reasonable two hours and 15 minutes. This might not be the perfect "Martha," but it's a perfect summer entertainment.

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