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MUSIC REVIEW

Monteverdi Drama, Plus a Little Parody

By JAMES R. OESTREICH

Eight days behind schedule because of Tropical Storm Floyd, an ambitious program by the Clarion Music Society finally opened the season of the Kaye Playhouse on Friday evening, appearing none the worse for wear. The peripheral attractions remained intact: modern dance set to Monteverdi's "Combattimento di Tancredi e Clorinda," and a semistaging of Marco Marazolli's "Fiera di Farfa," part of an opera written in collaboration with Virgilio Mazzochi that includes a little parody of "Combattimento."

Monteverdi's work tells of a battle in which Tancredi, a Christian crusader, kills Clorinda, a Saracen, discovering only belatedly that she is not a male warrior but a woman he once loved. In the performance here, with staging by Jacquelyn Buglisi, choreography by Donlin Foreman and costumes by A. Christina Giannini, Virginie Mecene and Kevin Predmore mimed the story in broad outline, an innocuous fillip.

But the real satisfactions of the evening lay in the musical essentials, especially the performance of Curtis Streetman, the narrator in "Corribattimento." Mr. Streetman, a bass with impressive credentials as an early music performer, is one of those rare singers who perform Monteverdi as if born to it. In his

easy command, seemingly free of self-consciousness, archaic types of vocal ornamentation proved the most natural form of communication imaginable. Mr. Streetman's performance riveted the attention with such self-sufficient eloquence that the dance mostly faded into insignificance.

On the other hand, the semistaging, directed by Paul Shipper, was dead on arrival: more a hemidemisemistaging, with the little chorus engaging in minimal meandering and maximal mugging, heads all the while buried in scores. "La Fiera di Farfa" ("The Fair at Farfa"), written in 1639, a year after "Combattimento" was published, is in any case an odd work, sure to bemuse modern audiences.

In remarks from the stage Frederick Hammond, Clarion's music director and the harpsichordist of the evening, urged that the work be thought of not as opera but as variety show; not as "Aida" but as the Three Stooges or the Marx Brothers. Without the laughs, maybe. The only chuckle here, from an audience listening in the dark to a rambling Italian text, came at the one word universally recognizable, "ravioli," in a basically unfunny context.

But who, unable to read Mr. Hammond's translation, knew? Since supertitles are cumbersome and expensive to produce, the work, with its unsophisticated setting of text, should perhaps have been sung in translation. At the very least, the house lights should have been left; brighter for purposes of reading. Even then, the Monteverdi parody was so subtle that few could have caught it without first having studied the program notes.

Still, in strictly musical terms, it was nice to encounter this period oddity as well as the rest of the program: Monteverdi's "Altri Cantt d'Amor" and three instrumental works by Stefano Landi. Mr. Hammond led a capable little band of six, and the chorus was laced with fine solo singers, including Rita Lilly and Philip Anderson, who sang the small roles of Clorinda and Tancredi.

Although enterprising attempts to give modern audiences heightened access to unusual historic material; should perhaps be encouraged, the case was not made strongly here. Then again, if every musical performance conveyed as much as Mr. Streetman's, all the rest might seem redundant.