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Review: Armida (Pinchgut Opera)

by *Clive Paget* on June 25, 2016 (just now) filed under *Classical Music* | *Opera* | [Comment Now](#)

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★★★★☆ **Star turns (and zombies) help Haydn's musical sorceress cast her spell.**

**City Recital Hall, Angel Place, Sydney
June 24, 2016**

Often regarded as the father of the symphony, ditto the string quartet, Joseph Haydn is seldom regarded as a major player in the opera game. Nevertheless, he wrote around 15 of them, and tuneful little devils they are too. Written for the Esterházy court, 1784's *Armida* was his last effort but one, and like his penultimate oratorio *The Creation*, shows a composer still determined to push his creative boundaries. With a score full of innovative ideas for aria and ensemble structure, it also sports copious revelatory accompanied recitatives. There are plenty of deliciously imaginative orchestrations too, plus a tiny *banda* to colour the music for the Frankish army. Its only snag is its dramaturgy – a problem that it has to be said besets other works on the same subject. Haydn's take may lack the flash of Handel's *Rinaldo* or the sensuality of Lully's *Armide*, but it has pace, variety and some very fine arias and duets.

A setting of an episode from Tasso's epic *Gerusalemme Liberata*,



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the opera tells of Idreno, King of Damascus, and his attempts to fend off the encroaching Frankish crusaders using the charms of his niece Armida. When the show begins, the cunning sorceress has successfully ensnared Rinaldo, their greatest warrior, in her considerable toils. The repeated attempts by Rinaldo's military mates to persuade the lovesick hero to return to the home team, and his endlessly repeated backsliding, form the bulk of the plot – one that it has to be said seems superficially to go over much of the same ground in each of the three acts. If Rinaldo says “I must leave you”, followed by “No, I cannot, for I love you” once he says it a dozen times. Although it's rewarding to see this rarity on its feet as written, you can't help feeling that an editor's pen might help matters along.

Looking deeper into the text, however, there are definite and more intriguing shifts in the emotional territory. Rinaldo goes from drugged and manipulated devotee to genuinely conflicted lover. Armida starts out just doing as she's told before falling for Rinaldo hook, line and sinker. These parallel psychological journeys are pretty well realised in Crystal Manich's visually engaging production, one that sits in a timeless world somewhere between the Enlightenment and the early 20th century. The American director's strongest moments come in the third act where her sense of theatricality comes to the fore and she allows a bit more of the 'magic' to bleed through. The gradual stripping away of Armida's illusory layers to reveal the desiccated ghoul beneath has a lovely *Game of Thrones* feel to it. The appearance of the baleful sorceress, Cathy Earnshaw-like behind the window, is a chilling *coup de théâtre*, as is her final 'going up in glitter' effect.

Alicia Clements imposing set, comprising nymph-haunted tangly woods, decaying monumental staircase and aerial penthouse, fills the City Recital Hall and is visually highly effective. However, the platform that serves as Armida's lair is a bit of a postage stamp, necessitating a great deal of repetitive pacing and prowling from the actors (Manich doesn't always help them enough here). It's also on the high side, creating a frustrating sense of distance in what is otherwise an intimate space, while the dangling microphones – presumably set up to record the show – exasperatingly cut across the audience's field of vision. Christie Milton's costumes work well, though a more specific historical milieu might have help unify matters and keep the feeling of 'dress up' at bay. Matthew Marshall's lighting design is effective, if perhaps a little over-gloomy on the forested lower level.

Leading the cast in a thoroughly bravura performance is Australian soprano (now New York-based) Rachele Durkin. Spitfire vocals are combined with a real sense of the text to create a compelling character, while her coloratura is outstanding and top notes entirely comfortable. Her vengeance aria, *Odio, furor, dispetto*, is a showstopper, while her ability to invest Haydn's meaty recitatives with meaning and musical nuance keeps things nicely on the boil.



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As Zelmira, the *seconda donna*, Janet Todd matches her in agility, her straighter timbre contrasting nicely with Durkin's fast vibrato. Blessed with a bell-like purity, she also sports an effortless top. Zelmira's character arc rather peters out (in this production she is killed off and joins the trio of zombie-nymphs who flit rather ineffectively around the place whenever there's mischief afoot). Her act three seduction aria, *Torna pure al caro bene*, is a show highlight.

The men are less consistently cast. Fortunately Swedish tenor Leif Aruhn-Solén has the ideal middle and top register for the arch-ditherer Rinaldo. His clean, sympathetic lyricism is most attractive, only lacking a matching warmth in the lower echelons of the role. Perhaps more successful as lover than hero, his coloratura is terrific and he makes *Caro, sarò fedele*, his long duet with Armida at the end of the first act, an appropriate climax (though the rampant sex that follows is a little awkwardly staged). Christopher Richardson is a sonorous Aussie bass. his Idreno is a nasty piece of work, strong in recitative, sometimes less so in arias where he's inclined to let his eye level drop. He has an impressive stature; he just needs to learn how to more effectively command the stage. Jacob Lawrence's tenor is not always as cleanly projected as it should be in the heroic role of Ubaldo (chief friend of Rinaldo), and dramatically he gets a little lost up against the more defined characters. His mate, Clotarco is virtually an expendable character, though Brenton Spiteri does what he can with it. His light, bright tenor suits the style as well as the acoustic.

At the helm of the Orchestra of the Antipodes, outgoing Pinchgut co-Artistic Director Antony Walker – Erin Helyard now takes over as sole AD – paces the music with a sure hand. His ability to give shape and dynamic to Haydn's appealing score is exemplary. He also possesses excellent dramatic instincts, though at times he allows the band to overwhelm some of the singers in the 'trumpets and drums' numbers. The orchestra are generally excellent. Despite the occasional tuning issue in the winds, they play throughout with passion and flair.

With its ambitious staging and vocal star turns, *Armida* is another masterly forgotten work put back where it belongs – on the operatic stage. And thanks to Walker, Durkin, Todd and Aruhn-Solén, it's another feather in Pinchgut's cap. Go see – but watch out – there's zombie-nymphs in them there woods.

***Armida* runs until June 28 at City Recital Hall, Sydney**

[Tickets](#)

Keywords

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Rachelle Durkin as Armida.
Photos by Brett Boardman

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