

Teatro Real Review 2019-20: Il Pirata

Yolanda Auyanet & Celso Albelo Are Remarkable in Inventive Production Plagued by Musical Letdowns

By Mauricio Villa

(Credit: Javier del Real)

The Teatro Real de Madrid presented Bellini's rarely performed "Il Pirata" with three casts in an aesthetically powerful production by Emilio Sagi in what is likely to be one of the highlights of the 2019-20 season. While the headliners of the first cast were Sonya Yoncheva and Javier Camarena, it was the second cast of Yolanda Auyanet and Celso Albelo that truly proved golden and will be the focus of this review.

The history of the work is a unique one. It was written for the famous 19th century tenor Rubbini and marked the birth of the "Romantic tenor" as the absolute protagonist. However, the work disappeared from the repertory during the second half of the 19th century (mainly because no tenor could handle the score Bellini wrote for Rubbini) but would make a comeback in the next century. However, it would not return as a showpiece for tenors but instead as a trademark for lyric sopranos; the tenor part was brutally cut and lowered. Luckily, the late 20th century Bel Canto renaissance has seemingly restored the work to its former glory.

An Exception

Canarian tenor Celso Albelo is one of the few tenors who can really do justice to the role of Gualtiero.

Albelo has a pure lyrical voice, with a present and round lower register, coupled with a strong middle and unbelievably secure and resonant high notes. Albelo has expressed that Gualtiero is a "Selfish psychopath, who mistreats the woman he loves for his own obsession of revenge" and that was how he confronted his opening aria "Nel furor delle tempeste." This aria had anger and menace where even the sweet legato line "come un angelo celeste" sounded dangerous. However, he provided musical contrast by singing the next line "si presenta al mio pensiero" in mezza voce, giving a different point of view of this ambiguous character. Then, following the stage directions, he leaned sweetly against the wall to sing the ending cadenza where he maintained a well-supported high D before ending on a long high B flat.

He sang the cabaletta "Per te divane lagrime" effortlessly, navigating between A flats and B Flats, attacking the octave interval from central to high D with precision and determination and singing the consequent chromatic scale with all the words "Ah! si vorrei, ah! si vorrei" crystal clear. This is a tremendously to achieve as articulating words on a line that has two high Cs, two high B flats and two A is always difficult. To conclude the piece he added an extra high C before resolving to high B flat, his voice completely present over the orchestra and forte chorus.

After such a demanding entrance aria, comes Gualtiero's first duet with Imogene, where the tessitura becomes nearly baritone, written mostly on the middle of the stave and not going higher than a G. It is here where Albello made the role his own. Albello confronted his beloved Imogene with regret, fury and violence, coloring his voice and playing with dynamics to achieve such goals. He sang long legato central phrases like "voce suonava un giorno" with confidence and projection and ended the duet on a high long C. The final concertante of Act one remains in this lower tessitura for the tenor, but Albello had no problem in keeping his voice present even while singing *mezza voce* alongside the soloists, chorus and orchestra.

The second act goes back to a perilous high tessitura for the tenor during his duet with Imogene and consequent trio with Ernesto. Albello navigated the lines confidently, showing an impressive breath control and long *fiato* on lines like "per noi un porto avrà, l'immenso mare avrà." He sang "Ah! per pietà deh! Sentimi" as a lament, using his exquisite *mezza voce* and *piannissimo* sound. He made a big contrast for the *terzeto* by returning to an aggressive vocalism, which becomes even higher with several ascensions to high B flats and A naturals. He coronated the passage with yet another high C.

The tenor has only five minutes of rest, during the chorus' "Lasso, perir così" before singing his last aria "Tu vedrai." This is the most lyrical page that Bellini wrote for the tenor in this opera, and even if Gualtiero's entrance is again menacing and furious, his singing becomes pitiful and lamenting. Albello achieved this emotional display with his ability to keep his timbre equal throughout his whole register. To cap it all off, he interpolated an extra high C during the coda of the cabaletta "Ma non fia sempre odiata" before adding another high D. It was truly magical to hear his high notes materialize pure and steady with no portamenti or appoggiatura from another note. It was a wondrous performance.

Imogene

Spanish soprano Yolanda Auyanet took on the role of the dolente Imogene, which demands a tessitura from low C to high C sharp with florid coloratura throughout. Since Auyanet began her career singing a lyrical-leggero repertoire like Gilda, Lucia or Norina, she maintains the flexibility of her voice and the ability to produce breathless *piannissimi*. However, her voice has grown considerably, becoming darker and voluminous, allowing her to aptly manage the difficulties of the score. Throughout the night, her coloratura technique was immaculate and the entire register from low to high proved secure. Her high notes were resonant.

Imogene has a high C in just her third line of recitative "antica legge di Caldora" before her aria "Io sognai ferito" keeps the voice in the middle register with two ascensions to high B flats and a dramatic coloratura passage "Quando a un tratto il mio consorte." Auyanet's interpretation of this aria explored the suffering of Imogene and gave hints of her mental instability which would drive her mad at the end of the opera. Her interpretation was chilling, making you forget how challenging it truly was. The cabaletta "Sventurata, anch'io deliro" is full of coloratura and high B naturals while maintaining this atmosphere of anguish and horror that Imogene is feeling. Auyanet managed to portray this pathos, filling the coloratura and high notes with a profound meaning.

During her duet with Gualtiero in the first act, Auyanet maintained the formality of a duchess who is worried for the unknown victim of the shipwreck early on before transforming into a woman in love. This latter anguish was explored through a strong high A natural on "Ah! è mio, è figlio mio," the soprano dropping to her knees and pleading desperately to prevent Gualtiero from stabbing her child. The duet ended with an interpolated high C where the soprano matched the volume and potency of Albello's voice.

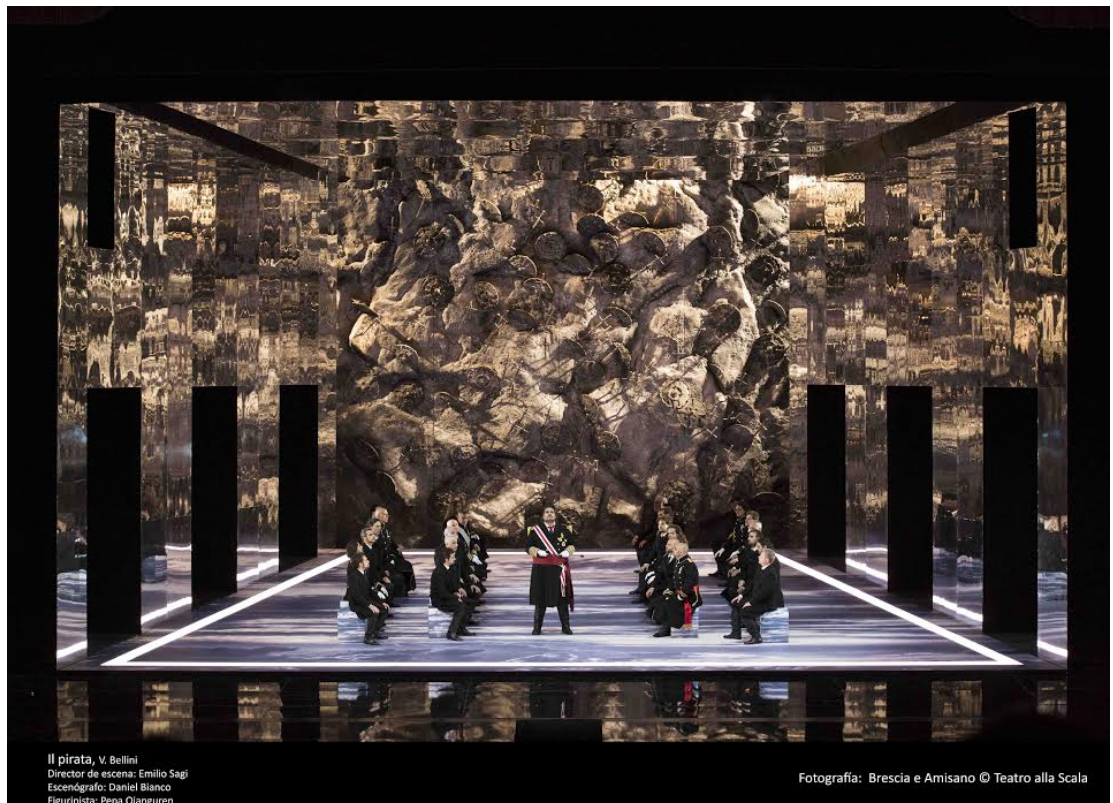
The final concertante proves a turning point for the soprano as she leads the scene musically and dramatically. Auyanet displayed her beautiful *mezza voce* during the phrase "Ah! signor così inclemente non ti trovi amica gente," sustained this hushed tone during the "Largo Agitato" while blending perfectly with her colleagues. Her lyrical voice is so strong and well-projected that the G that she sang before fainting was hair-raising. Her interpretation of the final Stretta "Ah! partiamo" expressed Imogene's desperation with clean and dramatic coloratura all the way up to a high B natural. Once again the final high C stamped the intensity of the moment.

The second act duet for Imogene and Ernesto might be one of the hardest moments for the soprano as Bellini demands everything for the singer: Bravura coloratura, low notes, high notes, legato singing, dynamics. Auyanet performed it completely, abandoning herself to Imogene's suffering. Again, you never felt the difficulty in the vocal part at all, so immersive was her interpretation. She was aggressive during "quando al padre io fu rapita," lyrical in "Ah! lo sento," and desperate and menacing in "Ah! fuggi spietato." She delivered high B flats with *piannissimo* sound and some forte B naturals as well. Her interpretation of the line "Eccomi a te Gualtiero, l'ultima volta a te," was astonishing for her sense of abandonment and the use of her sweet *mezza voce*.

Imogene's final scene is where the few sopranos who have dared to sing this role are judged; it might seem a bit unfair after all the soprano has managed to this point, but it is the most iconic moment of the opera. Here, Auyanet astounded with her incredible stamina and her solid technique, immersing herself in the intensity of the moment. Her voice soared from light and brilliant in some moments to dark, strong, and dramatic during others. There is a whole long English horn solo at the beginning of the scene, where Auyanet walked from the back of the stage covered in a huge long cape which hung from the back part of the scenery, her sight lost and her steps insecure as she covered Ernesto's sepulchre. She eventually fell to her knees as the long cape unhooked. The recitative "Oh! S'io potessi" is vocally simple, focusing all the drama on the soprano's interpretation. Auyanet masterfully captured the essence of this scene with disconnected phrases that explored Imogene's confusion and madness.

The aria "Col sorriso" might seem easy compared to other fragments of this opera, but it is in its simplicity where all the beauty and difficulty lies. Auyanet sang with emotion, making fluid long legato phrases, and leaving the two high A naturals suspended on flawless *piannissimi*. It is remarkable that after such a long demanding role, Auyanet managed to keep her voice fresh and her breath support intact.

During the brief recitative that links the aria with the cabaletta, the vocal lines become stronger and dramatic. Here, Auyanet gave all she had left, returning to her voluminous dark voice and attending all the demands of the score, including the four high C that Bellini wrote and that very few sopranos dare to sing live. But even if such a display of high C might seem difficult at the end of the performance, it is in the low notes and the crazy coloratura and interval jumps from high to low where the real difficulties of this page lies. This is where most sopranos run out and ultimately diminish their performances. Auyanet delivered the low line "di tenebre oscure" using her chest register on the low Cs, but not pushing the sound to make her voice bigger or dramatic. This enabled her to keep her coloratura fluid and clean. Her own variations during the repetition of the cabaletta were very inventive and in style, as was her final high C after which she delivered while stumbling to the front stage to fall dead, her head hanging over the edge of the stage.



(Credit: Javier del Real)

Utter Disappointments

Simone Piazzola's interpretation of Ernesto was rather disappointing.

The role is a short but difficult part. In keeping with the time of composition, the tessitura of the baritone was not clearly defined. Antonio Tamburini, who debuted the role, must have had a extensive tessitura that could rise to a high F sharp. He must have also managed a strong lower register as the writing for the role remains in the lower part of the role. Moreover, there is a major influence from Rossini in the vocal writing, the vocal line being completely florid and full of roulades and coloratura.

Piazzola's low register was muffled and plain, and his coloratura was not clean or articulate. He had a tendency to push the high notes in roulades rather than creating a fluid line. He interpolated an extra high G at the end of his cabaletta "Si, vincemmo," which was completely swallowed by the orchestra. The duet with Imogene in Act two proved to be out of his general range, where his intents to interpolate high F sharps seemed like a vain attempt to cover up his deficiencies in the coloratura and his lack of projection next to stage partner. Piazzola has a strong stage presence and his performance was saved by a strong characterization of the wicked Ernesto.

It is worth mentioning the work of the Bulgarian baritone Vladimir Stoyanov, who sang Ernesto in the third cast showed his professionalism, strong stagecraft and sense of drama, all while delivering clean coloratura and delivering presence in the lower registers; his interpolated high Gs were also quite resonant.

The performances of Marin Yonchev, María Miró and Felipe Bou as Itulbo, Adele and Goffredo respectively in small roles were impeccable, helping to enhance the drama and supporting the characters of Imogene, Gualtiero and Ernesto.

The chorus of Teatro Real sounded brilliant during the opening storm scene. Moreover, the male section showcased their abilities and professionalism during the demanding staging of the Pirate's chorus in Act one by jumping, dancing, fighting and rolling on the floor. The ensemble retained this high standard throughout the other choral passages in the opera.

The veteran Italian conductor Maurizio Benini presented a drastically cut version of the score where with only the overture seemingly spared. Gualtiero's repetitions of both cabalettas were cut, Imogene's coda of her first cabaletta was cut. These cuts are the normal ones, accommodating difficult passages for the soloists. However, the main issue was with the cuts in the choruses, recitatives, duets, and even four bars that did away with Gualtiero's line "Perfida, hai colmo appieno de'mali miei l'orror;" this latter one was egregious while the others seemed to be overkill.

But the cuts were just the start of the problem. Benini's tempi were strange and proved difficult for the singers. Often they were extremely slow, like in "Per noi tranquillo un porto," where the tenors (across all the casts) were exposed in this high long legato fragment. At other times they were extremely fast, such as during the end of the Terzeto in Act two where the singers could barely articulate the words; it sounded more like Rossini than Bellini. The choir and soloists were usually behind the orchestra which suggested that either Benini changed the tempi constantly from performance to performance or his indications were not clear to any of the singers. In sum, Benini's interpretation across several performances was sloppy at best and seemingly improvised at worst.

The production by Emilio Sagi, Daniel Bianco and Pepa Ojanguren was meaningful and beautiful, something very rare to see these days. The team designed a common space marked by an inclined floor painted in blue, gray and white, simulating fog or clouds, and walls and a mirror ceiling which reflected the floor and what was happening on stage. It mostly shows a cold atmosphere, but there is even a snowed landscape at the back for the second act duet between Imogene and Ernesto. But this closed and somehow cold claustrophobic stage where the characters are enclosed, opens up at the end of the opera as the walls moved to the sides, increasing the size of the stage, creating a magnificent effect of devastation and isolation. Ojanguren's costumes are timeless but always play up the contrasts between black and white.

Emilio Sagi uses this suggestive cold and morbid set to give a modern meaning to such a Romantic gothic plot, where the passions of the main characters are exacerbated and exaggerated. His artistry showed a clever use of the chorus, creating contrast between the stillness and rightness of the court scenes with the wild and vivid Pirates' chorus. The audience rewarded their work on the opening night with enthusiastic applause, something quite strange for

Madrid's conservative audience; the Madrid aficionados generally show disapproval of modern stagings.

Ultimately this was a deficient musical presentation of Bellini's rare third opera which was saved thanks to the extraordinary voices of Auyanet and Albelo and a beautifully inspired and well-directed stage production.

