Russian Invasion Succeeds (and it’s Funny)

by Bartlett Naylor 05/23/11

Russian soprano Julie Novikova, in her debut with the Washington National Opera, needed Act I of Donizetti’s Don Pasquale to warm up her vocal engines. But by Act II, this coquette joined her flirtatious acting as the beguiling Norina with full voice to help drive home a thoroughly seductive production at the Kennedy Center May 22.

This truffle, or “opera buffo,” turns on the maxim that Norina enjoins in the final act: “An old man who marries a young woman must be out of his mind.” To arrive at this wisdom, Dr. Malatesta stages an ersatz marriage for crotchety old Uncle Pasquale with Sofronia, played by Norina (yes, played by Novikova). With the ink on the marriage contract still damp, Sofronia proceeds to spend Pasquale dry. By Act III, Pasquale quickly agrees to the union of Norina and his nephew Ernesto, which he’d stubbornly resisted at the opera’s opening. Pasquale wants quick relief from her spendthrift orgies. (Pasquale never gets the orgy he wants. And true, some grocery lists have more plot.)

Donizetti had composed some 70 operas before this one in 1843 and Maestro Placido Domingo has performed in or conducted several multiples of that. So, along with veteran James Morris, performing in a rare comedy, this conjunction of experience could easily carry any novice.

Baltimore native Morris, more often heard in the power operas by German Wagner where he often sings Wotan, needed no warm-up in his Kennedy Center debut. Playing Don Pasquale, Morris convinces as a septuagenarian, stumbling around the stage, vainly attempting to wrap his lascivious arms around his quick footed kitten Sofronia/Norina. (In a question-and-answer session after the Sunday afternoon performance with the audience, Morris reflected on the difference between singing light Donizetti and heavy Wagner. “It’s shorter,” he said.)

Nor did another Russian newcomer, a promising tenor named Alexey Kudrya, require any practice before crooning about his broken heart when Pasquale forbids his marriage request. Kudrya and Novikova made a most handsome couple, and had Morris’ Pasquale been weaker, one might simply have been satisfied with their love duets.

Under Domingo’s baton, we move quickly through this brief comedy, pausing for two intermissions to lengthen the running time to two-and-a-half hours. Wonderful, period staging flies speedily from above and on sides. The chorus sends us out after Act II with both jaunty singing and choreography. (And if you want to know where Academy Award winning director Francis Ford Coppola borrowed some haunting music for the Godfather, pay attention to the opening of Act II.) The chorus returns to sing while peaking out the second-story windows into the garden as the comedy climaxes in Act III.

But back to Novikova. In her most memorable scene, the capable baritone Dwayne Croft as Malatesta rehearses her as Sofronia, asking her to demonstrate anger, modesty, flirtation and more. This young waif accomplishes her assignments with such speed and effectiveness that the audience knows far in advance of Pasquale to beware such a Russian invasion. As for her voice, it’s a wonder she can produce the power required to fill the opera house given her diminutive, model-thin frame. Opera lovers who prefer their actors to look something like their characters can be well pleased with Novikova. And since this is absurd comedy, we need help suspending disbelief.

The Washington National Opera closes its season with performances of Don Pasquale through May 27. (There are two casts for this Pasquale, and I’m tempted to go back and see the second.)