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Venetian Splendour : a tribute made in BA

By Pablo Bardin

In recent years, Patricia Pouchulu has crowned her activity by conducting a concert at the Avenida Theatre. Ever since she embarked in this new direction, she has shown meticulous preparation and an intense love of music. With sponsorship declining this season due to the economic situation, she had to abandon her first project, a fully symphonic night featuring two great works, Rimsky-Korsakov's Scheherazade and Brahms' Fourth Symphony.

And so she concocted a different and interesting idea: Venetian Splendour, Arts Fusion. It is indeed a unique city. Maritime islands that were first peopled back in the 5th century, as a result of Aquileia being invaded by the Huns; if you are an opera enthusiast, you probably remember the scene in Verdi's *Attila* where the émigrés from that city start the settling of the islands in the vast lagoon.

As the centuries went by, Venice became the Queen of the Adriatic, a major commercial and political power. After becoming a Republic around 1150, it consolidated its growth and domination of Mediterranean trade, vanquishing both the Byzantines and the Genoese. Later the struggle was against the Turks (15th century), and the discovery of the New World also limited Venice's influence, but it remained strong in its own area. And the arts flourished. Saint Mark, the Doges' Palace, the splendid buildings along the Canal Grande, the richness of the city, all added up.

The great "scuole" (schools) gave rise to magnificent painters: the Bellinis, Carpaccio, Tiziano, Tintoretto, Veronese, and later on Canaletto or Guardi. And music grew strongly during the Renaissance and the Baroque, centred on St Mark, the "ospedali" (orphanages) and on the first public opera houses in history. The great madrigalists, the transplanted Flemish masters, the polychoral Gabriellis, opera composers like Monteverdi, Cavalli and Vivaldi, and again Vivaldi in the development of the concerto form, all this meant that Venice was, roughly from 1550 to 1750, one of the essential European musical centres.

So Venetian Splendour is an attractive and logical idea. Why "Arts Fusion"? Well, Pouchulu wanted to add a visual approach to the purely musical side. She enlisted Sergio Pelacani, who designed colourful period costumes; Lizzie Waisse, who handled the movements onstage; Margarita Fernández, who provided some dances with a *Commedia dell'arte* approach, agreeable but distracting; and lighting design by Luis Pereiro and Alfredo Morelli.

The musical side was quite attractive: a hand-picked string ensemble, not historicist but very musical (concertino, Grace Medina) with guest harpsichordist Giorgio Revelli for the continuo; several first-rate instrumental soloists; and a group of talented singers, accompanied in the case of Monteverdi by historicist players.

In the programme there were two essential choices: the Venetian Antonio Vivaldi, and Claudio Monteverdi, who lived his mature years there. Both were the undoubted leaders and were well represented; the first, by four concerti, a fragment of the oratorio *Juditha triumphans* and as an encore, the start of the famous *Gloria RV 589*; the second, by a 1624 scherzo; by the three-part *Lamento della ninfa* from the Eighth Book of Madrigals (1638); and by the famous final duet *Pur ti miro, pur ti godo* from *L'incoronazione di Poppea* (paradoxically, recent research concludes that it isn't by Monteverdi, but it's beautiful and in his style).

The Vivaldi concerti: for oboe and bassoon RV 545, splendid jobs by Rubén Albornoz and Gabriel La Rocca; *La Stravaganza No. 2* and *Winter* from *The Four Seasons*, with a marvellous Pablo Saraví, at the top of his violinist powers; and for two celli, RV 531, with nice playing from Carlos Nozzi and Jorge Pérez Tedesco. There were two other concerted pieces by Venetians: the famous *Concerto for oboe* (1716) by Alessandro Marcello, with an impeccable Albornoz; and the *Sonata for trumpet, strings and continuo* by Domenico Gabrieli (not Gabrielli, as printed in the hand programme), brilliantly performed by Fernando Ciancio. (Domenico is from Bologna, not as Andrea and Giovanni, great Venetians at St Mark).

Pouchulu conducted all these pieces with an appreciation of the Baroque and got very good playing from her 15-member string ensemble. There is, of course, room for a historicist approach but I like this music done both ways if there is a feeling for rhythm and the vibrato is controlled, as it was in this case.

I accept the *Barcarolle* from Offenbach's *Les Contes d'Hoffmann* (in a curious version by countertenor Damián Ramírez and mezzosoprano Mariana Rewerski) for it is "about" Venice. But Handel's *Rinaldo* was his first London opera; in fact, the only correct choice would have been his sole Venetian opera, *Agrippina*; and Ramírez sang an over-ornamented *Lascia ch'io pianga* from *Rinaldo*. And it was quite wrong to start proceedings with *O sole mio*, sung by Carlos Ullán; a gondolier song such as the melancholy one from Rossini's *Otello* would have been right.

Rewerski, Ullán, Víctor Torres and Pablo Pollitzer were fine in the *Lamento della ninfa*; Pollitzer however sang with a bleat the scherzo *Si dolce è'l tormento*; Rewerski and Torres were also convincing in *Pur ti miro*. And the historicist group was excellent: Miguel de Olaso (archlute), Dolores Costoyas (theorbo), Hernán Cuadrado (viola da gamba), and Revelli. Soledad de la Rosa wasn't at her best in the hectic version of the *Juditha triumphans* aria. All in all, the balance was quite it truly was an evening to enjoy.