

Rienzi in New York

Text: Craig Knobles

Rienzi, der Letzte der Tribunen received its first performance in New York in 1848, only a few years after its premiere in Dresden, but the opera's glory time in the city was in 1886 and 1887, when the charismatic Wagner disciple Anton Seidl conducted it 20 times for the recently formed Metropolitan Opera, eight of them on tour. Three years later in 1890, Walter Damrosch conducted a single performance, and that was it for *Rienzi* at the Met, except an occasional aria or the overture at concerts. Since then the sole person making *Rienzi* a living experience for New Yorkers has been Eve Queler and her Opera Orchestra of New York, who presented concert performances in 1980 with Edward Sooter in the title role, in 1982 with William Johns, and in 1992 with Reiner Goldberg. On January 29 she did it again, in Lincoln Center's Avery Fisher Hall. As she told a Wagner Society of New York audience, "I program the opera whenever I can find the singers."

So who were the singers that convinced Maestra Queler to do it this time around? The brightest of the main trio was G eraldine Chauvet as Adriano, whose warm stream of mezzo sound was particularly urgent. Irene was sung by Elisabete Matos, a Portuguese soprano with agility and a huge voice: this was no shrinking violet Irene, and Ms. Matos's voice was suited more to the Valkyrie-like sister of the last act, than to the earlier maiden. A puzzle was Ian Storey, the title character, whose tenor was so gravelly it was hard to determine which note was being sung. The answer to his participation

may be that he was engaged when the voice was fresher, as in the La Scala *Tristan*. He did sing with power, showing the strength of the hero, but no warmth.

The performance contained almost 3 hours of music. In a near five-hour opera, this meant vast cutting, par for the course even in staged presentations. As Queler explained her cuts, they were mostly of music that was in the score for stage purposes, not necessary for a concert: the ballet music, of course, since she was not endowed with a dance company, and some of the lengthy marches and repetitions. But other parts fell as well. I particularly missed Baroncelli's arioso over those killed in the third act battle, especially since Jonathan Winell in the role had such a sweet-voiced tenor. He was joined by fine singers in other small parts: Shannon DeVine as Cecco, Philip Horst and Ricardo Rivera as solid-voiced nobles, and a Raimondo, Brandon Cedel, whose bass boomed from somewhere out of sight below me, both in his first act intervention and the proclamation of excommunication.

Emily Duncan-Brown, radiant in white, was a crystal-clear Messenger of Peace, but what most beguiled in that scene were the children of Vox Nova of the Special Music School, who marched down the aisle from the rear of the hall not missing a beat as they sang, clad also in luminous white. Choruses are a major component of Wagner's grand opera, and while the men were a bit out of synch in the fractious music opening Act IV, the New York Choral Society served Queler well. She

was let down, however, by the U.S. Military Academy at West Point, whose glee club was to sing the Battle Hymn in Act III. A ruling the week before the concert by West Point blocked their participation, but thirty male members of the unemployed City Opera Chorus were rounded up and, cheat-sheets in hand, sang lustily and (more astonishingly) together as they too marched down the aisle, and this with only an hour's rehearsal that morning.

All Maestra Queler's performances of Wagner's opera have used the vast halls of Avery Fisher and Carnegie to satisfy the spatiality Wagner employs in this opera, not only with multiple choruses, but with the positioning of brass choirs throughout the house. The Act III battle with its strains of warlike music coming from all sides was exceptionally exciting, a mighty contribution to a splendid afternoon.



Eve Queler, the conductor of this concert performance of Rienzi.

Rienzi at Avery Fisher Hall, New York January 29, 2012

Text: John L. DiGaetani

Eve Queler and her Opera Orchestra of New York have become a beloved institution, doing concert versions of unusual opera which are rarely staged. Three times in the last thirty years she has performed Wagner's *Rienzi* and made a good case for this first of Wagner's successes. The opera was first staged in Dresden in 1842 under Wagner's supervision and put him on the operatic map of 19th century—and the rest is history, as they say.

Ian Storey's *Rienzi* dominated the performance, as it should, and this heldentenor had the large accurate voice this role demands. While this is not the most beautiful tenor voice around, it is large and accurate and did not wear out at the end so that his *Rienzi* kept the audience engaged. Storey made the character a heroic presence who was trying to control the various political forces in Rome in the 14th century.

Elisabete Matos' Irene (sister of *Rienzi*) became an audience favorite as well since

her large, steely voice was always audible and became a dramatic and lovely sound as well. The audience also enjoyed Geraldine Chauvet's Adriano; this trouser role as *Rienzi*'s sister's lover, who dies with him and Irene at the end, refusing to abandon *Rienzi* when all his other followers did, had a vocal and dramatic delight which captivated the audience.

The smaller roles impressed as well—Eve Queler does an uncanny ability to pick out wonderful voices. Emily Duncan-Brown's Messenger of Peace kept the audience enthralled because her limpid singing. Ricardo Rivera's Paolo Orsini made a forceful foil to the Stefano Colonna of Philip Horst. Brandon Cedel's Raimondo also added to the vocal and musical pleasures of the evening.

The chorus—or rather choruses—in this opera have much to sing as well, and here too Eve Queler amassed and controlled her large forces to good effect. The New York Choral Society, the West Point Cadet

Glee Club, and the Vox Nova Chorus of children's voices all added to the musical success of this *Rienzi*.

While one wishes that Queler conducted more quietly in certain spots and shaped more of the musical phrases more often, these were minor issues given the overall success of this performance. While *Rienzi* is not one of the great Wagnerian operas and is too often bombastic and has too many fanfares and repeats its music too often, this opera continued to maintain our attention even after its popular overture. I wish more opera companies would stage this wonderful work since it contains so much good music and points toward the Wagnerian masterpieces to come. With this opera's premiere in Dresden in 1842, Wagner became a major force in the history of opera. In his maturity Wagner came to dislike the opera and did not want it performed at Bayreuth, but this opera still can entertain an audience.