

# RICHARD BONYNGE

## CONDUCTOR

---

BRISBANE TIMES

### I Capuleti E I Montecchi

Reviewed by Peter McCallum

August 13, 2009

Opera Australia Opera House, August 11

ACCORDING to Groves Dictionary, Franz Liszt found Bellini's I Capuleti e i Montecchi "intolerably old-fashioned". Those who booed at the end of Act 1 of Orpha Phelan's modernised production probably wished it were more so.

Yet Phelan captures more of the original context than they may have realised. Though he was a moderniser in his way, Bellini fell foul of the shift towards realism in theatre and a more symphonic conception in music. Phelan juxtaposes the gentle expressiveness of Bellini's lines with grim, dehumanised realism of modern sectarian violence: a young boy (Alexander Keighley) is taught to shoot an enemy woman before he is held hostage, a knife at his throat.

The assertive disconnection between music and drama thus embodies the love-and-hate dichotomy at the heart of the Romeo and Juliet story.

We have grown to expect that the hate will be portrayed by little more than costumed sword-play, and Phelan's confronting approach was bound to ruffle feathers. For me, the incongruity of setting added an effective edge in places while in others, such as the nightmare sequence in which Giulietta is thrown around like rag doll, the gesture, though ingenious, missed its mark.

The great musical glories were the duets between Emma Matthews (Giulietta) and Catherine Carby (in the "breeches" role of Romeo). Carby combined wonderfully flexible vocal expressiveness with a haughty stage swagger so that her pluck, statuesque carriage and fragility amid the realism of guns and knives created a genuine frisson. Matthews sang with superbly languorous bell canto colour and shape, matching Carby's sound and the lyrical tenor of Henry Choo (who took over the part of Tebaldo at short notice) with equal comeliness. Choo's smooth sound and instinct for melodic shape is natural for this style, and his stage movement was impressive for a last-minute substitution.

**Conductor Richard Bonyng** had brought the woodwind and horns to the front and elevated the orchestra to bring the sound out of the pit, so that it had brightness and presence, and the players were able to concentrate on focused ensemble discipline and vigour. Stephen Bennett was strong and incisive as Capellio.

Leslie Travers's menacing design was basically a parquet floor progressively torn up by strife. Liszt, in any event, would have loved the singing.

---

*Colbert Artists Management*

111 West 57th Street, New York, NY 10019

www.colbertartists.com ~ 212-757-0782