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Prelude to Performance presents 'La Fille Du Regiment'



Martina Arroyo seated center with Prelude to Performance members. Photos by Jen Joyce Davis

By Nino Pantano
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On the evening of Friday, July 10, the Martina Arroyo Foundation presented the comedy masterpiece "La Fille du Regiment" ("The Daughter of the Regiment"). Gaetano Donizetti (1797-1848) composed the tune-filled music, with a witty libretto by Jules Henri Vernoy de St. Georges and Jean-Francois Bayard. It was Donizetti's first work in French and premiered at the Opera Comique in Paris on Feb. 11, 1840.

Memorable performances at the Metropolitan Opera included two performances at the Brooklyn Academy of Music (BAM) on tour in December 1917 with soprano Frieda Hempel as Marie, tenor Fernando Carpi as Tonio and renowned baritone Antonio Scotti as Sulpice. Charming and legendary French coloratura soprano Lily Pons was Marie in 1940, with many French-flag-waving performances during World War II. Luciano Pavarotti catapulted to fame as Tonio, singing nine high Cs in 1972 with sometimes Brooklyn resident soprano Joan Sutherland as his Marie.

This is the 11th season of Prelude to Performance and the two acclaimed offerings were "Madama Butterfly" and "La Fille du Regiment", running for a total of four performances.

Midge Woolsey from Channel 13, the development director of the Martina Arroyo Foundation, spoke briefly and eloquently about Prelude to Performance and the intense period of six weeks of preparation. After the young, promising performers are chosen, the coaching, acting and stagecraft is all paid for by the foundation, with stipends as well. The results were critical acclaim for both "Madama Butterfly" and "La Fille du Regiment." Ms. Woolsey went on to say that her husband, Dr. Jerry Stolt, made the transition from rock 'n roll fan to opera devotee because of Prelude to Performance.

As the opera unfolds, an adopted child, Marie, was raised by the regiment but has fallen in love with Tonio. Marie can only marry a soldier from the 21st regiment. Marie is really the daughter of the marquise, who relents and allows Marie to marry Tonio. All ends happily.

Marie was beautifully sung by Venezuelan soprano Maria Fernanda Brea, whose fearless, peerless coloratura soprano dominated the proceedings whether in ensemble, lament or duet. Marie's marching aria, "Chacun le sait," was a delight. She never exaggerated or wasted a gesture and ensured the audience of a flesh and blood persona rather than a cardboard caricature of one. Ms. Brea's coloratura flights seemed effortless and were thrilling. She scored a major triumph!

Tonio was sung by Spencer Hamlin, who was a perfect blend in soaring duet with Marie and an exciting "A mes amis" in which he belted out nine high Cs. His tenor is a pure lyric with a lot of bite to it. He can conjure up substantial power without shouting and yet the frisson adds to the intensity and satisfaction of the moment. Hamlin was more the clever ardent suitor than the country bumpkin, which added to the portrayal. Mr. Hamlin's soulful singing of "Pour me rapprocher de Marie" was a high point of the evening.

Jacopo Buora was an excellent Sulpice, his penetrating, sonorous bass-baritone and charming countenance made for an outstanding interpretation.



Ensemble Cast of 'La Fille du Regiment'



Soprano Lucine Amara as La Duchesse de Krakenthorp

Karolina Pilou was a delight as the Marquise de Berkenfield, her rich, expressive expansive mezzo and comic antics caught every eye and ear. One could not help but yield to her vocal and histrionic charms.

Baritone John Callison was a strong Hortensius, Tommy Petrushka as the Corporal used his notable resonant bass-baritone to strong effect and tenor James Hunter handled his duties as Notary with aplomb.

Former Metropolitan Opera great soprano Lucine Amara, a very young 90, did a special guest appearance as "La Duchesse de Krakenthorp," a speaking role, and proved herself to be a master of comedy. Brava!

Maestro Imre Pallo conducted the 30-piece orchestra with verve and spirit. He brought out the nuances of this delightful score from the toe-tapping overture to the joyous finale. Kudos to the excellent assistant conductor and chorus master, Noby Ishida. Costume assistant was Paige Brigante; the excellent French coach Dr. Susan Stout; the innovative Laura Alley, stage director; and Joshua Rose the lighting designer. Special kudos to Charles R. Caine, the costume designer, and Steven Horak, the wig and makeup designer. It was a splendidly costumed, beautifully directed and colorful production, and the French sung and spoken was flawless!

The audience responded with many cheers and bravos. It was a joy to meet and greet the great soprano Martina Arroyo, whose father Demetrius had a job as an engineer at the Brooklyn Navy Yard, which helped to pay for her music lessons. Mme. Arroyo, a Kennedy Center awardee, remains active and so proud of her students and her foundation. We chatted with Mark Rucker, administrative director, who is a highly acclaimed Met Opera baritone. We have a common hero in the late legendary Met Verdi bari-

tone, the Bronx-born Leonard Warren, who was married to Agatha Leiffen at St. Charles Borromeo Church on December 23, 1941, in Brooklyn Heights. Mark's wife, the vibrant and industrious Sadie Rucker, does publicity for the Martina Arroyo Foundation and is personal coach and accompanist for her husband on his concert tours throughout the U.S. It was a joy to chat with Channel 13 host Raphael Pi Roman, who we first met when we participated in Channel 13's "Walk Around Brooklyn" 15 years ago, and also to "meet and greet" Met opera legend soprano Elinor Ross and new Opera Index President and Met mezzo Jane Shaulis. In our row in the theater, we were hosted by Stephen De Maio, president of the Gerda Lissner Foundation; Gloria Gari, president of the Giulio Gari Foundation; and Karl Michaelis and Michael Fornabai, fellow "movers and shakers" in the opera world.

Congratulations to all who provided us with such a treasured evening. We wish fulfillment of the dreams of all the talented young singers who gave their all for Martina Arroyo and the audience of the intimate (624 seats) Danny Kaye-Sylvia Fine Playhouse, named after two illustrious Brooklynites who would be happy to know that their namesake theater helped foster the future history of opera through the efforts of the Martina Arroyo Foundation.

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