

Tension, suspension, text: conversation with Alessandrini

Acclaimed early music conductor and head of the ensemble Concerto Italiano, in Toronto working with Canadian Opera Company

By Lydia Perovic

The acclaimed early music conductor and the head of the ensemble Concerto Italiano Rinaldo Alessandrini is in Toronto this spring, conducting Handel's *Semele* at the Canadian Opera Company. The closing weekend performance for this out-of-the-ordinary production at the Four Seasons Centre for the Performing Arts is on May 26 at 4:30pm. *Tandem* had the opportunity to meet with conductor Alessandrini during the production's Toronto run to discuss his involvement and upcoming projects.

This *Semele* is on modern instruments. How big is the transition from playing it with a period ensemble?

It's totally different. It's important not to expect from the so-called modern orchestra what you would get from a period orchestra. Period instruments allow certain types of articulation... you can explain the effect but the way of getting there is different because the instruments are so different. It's important to know what the final effect should be and how to achieve it. When you start working with a modern orchestra, you have to give a lot of condensed information about the meaning of staccato, the special use of the bow, the difference between sustaining the sound without vibrato or with vibrato... You have to give a sort of summary of sound possibilities related to the musical situation. That is absolutely interesting because in the process the conductor is discovering different ways to approach the same problem. And the orchestra is hopefully discovering different ways to approach the music.

You start by saying, Handel is not Verdi. So let's see where the borderlines of this music are; let's see what this music is offering in terms of sound, use of the sound, and then what this means in terms of the bow, left hand, articulation, vibrato, use of the dynamics and so on. I would say that it's like learning a new language.

Did you have to reduce the orchestra?

No. It's a big orchestra; we have 18 violinists. That makes things a little bit more tricky but it's OK. It's a very good orchestra with very intelligent musicians. What I like about this orchestra is that the quality is increasing every night, it's fantastic. This means that the orchestra is able to assimilate and to give better results every night.

The COC *Semele* is in modern pitch?

Yes. The talk about the pitch is not at all simple, though. 440Hz is an historical pitch too; this kind of very high pitch's been used in Venice, for example. All Vivaldi operas should be performed in 440, and before Vivaldi, the pitch was even higher. In Monteverdi's time the pitch was 520. And in France it was 392. The right pitch for the right period takes some deliberation.

Today we mainly use three pitches, 440, 415 and 392. 440 for Italian music, 415 mainly for



German music and for Handel, and 392 for French music.

What would you say makes *Semele* special and different from Handel's other work?

I'd say the most important is the development of the solo vocal line. The role of *Semele* is really demanding – it's fair to say, difficult. In fact it's a role that can be approached only with a soprano that has no problems. I don't want to say that this role is easy for Jane [Archibald] but she is the right person in the right place. You must have the coloratura for this role; moreover, you must have a kind of easy and mechanical coloratura for it.

Did you decide all the embellishments?

I worked with the singers. Normally I can have my ideas, but ornamentation is a very delicate question for singers. It's usually presumed that when they sing ornamentation added to the original line, they do this to show off their voices. This means that, of course, you can recompose. But you cannot be sure that what you recompose will fit a particular singer. So I spend time at the piano showing different pos-

sibilities, five, six, ornamenting some passages and letting singers decide, OK, I like this, I feel engaged with this kind of writing or not. Same with cadenzas, starting with some simple structures and adding more and more until the singer says, OK, this is perfect for me.

Let's talk about your discography. I'll begin by asking you about the Vivaldi edition. Today, the labels are reluctant to record complete operas, but Naïve / Opus 111 are doing this huge Vivaldi series which includes a number of operas.

Concerto Italiano and I left a little bit the Vivaldi Edition for now because we've done a lot. We've done two operas, we've done *Vespri per l'Assunzione*, we'll probably do a second recording of sacred music, possibly another Vespers disc. We are talking about this currently, but it will not happen in the very near future.

The project is mainly related to a library in Torino, so a regional bank, San Paolo, decided to donate the money. At the very beginning when the label was Opus 111 (not Naïve), the proj-

ect was called Music in Piedmont, but since most of Vivaldi's manuscripts are in this university library in Torino, the project was transformed into the Vivaldi Edition. But they are not planning to record any of the printed music, say *L'estro armonico* or *Il cimento dell'armonia*; they will not record the concertos from the Dresden library or other libraries. They are focusing only on the Torino manuscripts, and almost 90 percent of all Vivaldi's music is in Torino.

You recorded some amazing CDs of madrigals. Gesualdo and Marenzio still rarely get performed and recorded.

Madrigals can be used for learning about music... It's a highly composed speech, put it that way. First of all, madrigal gives you the opportunity to see how music and poetry can go together. Then the next step is to see how the melodic line can underline the meaning of the verse. And when you consider only the melodic line and forget the verse for a moment, you learn a lot about music. When you perform purely instrumental music, you can see how the madrigal influenced in-



On top: Jane Archibald in Canadian Opera Company's *Semele*; Below: Scene from *Semele*, Canadian Opera Company 2012 (Photos: Chris Hutcheson); Above: Rinaldo Alessandrini

sivity of those poems. The attitude was, OK let's listen to this new version of "Ardo si ma non t'amo". This was a well known poem and the pleasure was to listen to something well known dressed in different instruments. Or "Zefiro torna", or whatever. Most frequently used poets were Tasso, Guarini, Petrarca. Marino. It's a very special pleasure that is lost today, because the first urge is to listen to the music but the music is only part of the pleasure.

For madrigals, the first step was not to listen to the music but to be familiar with the text. To be familiar with the image and the sensation of the text. And when finally you own the text and you feel it personally, then listen to it set to the music, it is fantastic. But if you just listen to the music, it can be fine, the music is beautiful, but you lose 70 percent of the pleasure.

I like madrigals. Were I ever to be asked, "What kind of music would you like to do for the rest of your life", I would

answer "Madrigals". There is this kind of incredible tension in the madrigal, this incredible concentration of information, of music and text together. You start and your breath is suspended until the end. It's so tense and compact and detailed at the same time. Madrigals were in fashion back in the nineties, I remember we've done a lot of madrigal concerts then. But today... I'm not sure.

At any rate, we have to finish our Monteverdi series of madrigals. We should record the three remaining books. We recorded 2, 4, 5, 6 and 8. Next year we'll probably record the 1, 3 and 7. And in 2014 we have a huge project in Paris -- we are going to do the three Monteverdi operas at the Palais Garnier, so Naïve is interested in presenting the complete madrigals at the same time. We've already done *L'Orfeo* and *Ulisse* at La Scala, as this is a co-production between La Scala & Opera Bastille.

For *Ulisse* in September last year, the house was sold all six times. And I insisted on having the Italian cast, even though it's been a lot of work to teach them all to speak the same language.

After that, the revival of *Poppea* in February 2015 at La Scala. **And what's coming immediately after the Toronto *Semele*?**

A concert with Concerto Italiano, and coming in the summer, concerts with modern orchestras. Mozart, Haydn. My next opera production is in 2013 in Oslo – I'll be doing *Orfeo* by Gluck. I know the orchestra very well, it will be a pleasure to go back to Oslo. ♦

And I think that madrigal music can be a little bit difficult because it's in Italian and you cannot listen to this music if you don't understand the words. A lot of poets were used for madrigals, but most often, the composer would choose among a limited pool of poems.

Because of the metrics, number of syllables and such?

No, because of the expres-