

April 16, 2020 – Rossini's *Semiramide*

On this week's WCPE Opera House, the late **Al Ruocchio** (1937-2007) introduces Gioachino Rossini's *Semiramide*. First performed in Venice in 1823, *Semiramide* was once famously called the last and most beautiful of the great baroque operas. The description is in some respects inaccurate: later Italian composers looked back to it on occasion, and Verdi's *Aida* unquestionably owes something to its monumentality. Rossini's source is a play by Voltaire that overlays the legend of Semiramide, the promiscuous queen of Babylon, with echoes of the myths of Orestes and Oedipus, together with overtones of Macbeth.

Following an Overture that borrows themes from the opera itself (thereby making it unsuitable for use in another work), the high priest Oroe (bass **Spiro Malas**) declares the day sacred to Baal and calls upon Queen Semiramide (soprano **Joan Sutherland**) to choose her successor to the throne of Babylon. Prince Assur (bass **Joseph Rouleau**) hopes to be chosen. As Semiramide calls upon Nino, her dead husband, there is a clap of lightning and the sacred fire on the altar goes out. Arsace (mezzo-soprano **Marilyn Horne** in a "trouser" role), commander of the army, returns at the command of Semiramide. He eagerly anticipates his reunion with his beloved Princess Azema (soprano **Patricia Clark**). Before his death, Arsace's father told his son to give certain possessions to the high priest Oroe. This Arsace does. Oroe tells Arsace that his father was murdered--and implicates Prince Assur, who is furious that Arsace has returned to the capital. Assur tells Arsace that he intends to marry Azema. Semiramide herself is in love with Arsace. She is comforted by an oracle that predicts her sufferings will end when Arsace marries. Semiramide names Arsace as her Consort and husband. Assur protests. The Queen gives Azema to the Indian King Idreno (tenor **John Serge**). An earthquake indicates the wrath of the gods. Nino's Ghost (bass **Michael Langdon**) returns from the grave and commands Arsace to avenge his father.

Assur reminds Semiramide that she mixed the poison that he administered to Nino. "You convinced me that I was about to be banished," the Queen responds. She places her hopes in Arsace. Assur swears revenge. Oroe reveals to Arsace that he is in fact Ninias, son of Nino--and that Semiramide is his mother. When Arsace tells Semiramide the truth about their relationship, she begs him to kill her--but he forgives her instead. Idreno longs for Azema's love. The nobles loyal to Assur warn him that he has been exposed by Oroe. Assur decides to catch Arsace and kill him when he enters Nino's tomb. An invisible hand grabs Assur and thrusts him to the ground, but the prince recovers and ignores the warning. Oroe, Arsace, Semiramide and Assur all descend into Nino's tomb. Arsace kills Assur and is hailed by the people.

Richard Bonynge conducts the London Symphony Orchestra and the Ambrosian Singers in this 1966 Decca/London recording, CD number 4757918.

From a 1963 performance of *Semiramide*, **Joan Sutherland** demonstrates why she was known as "La stupenda" and "Prima donna assoluta" as she easily sings "Bel raggio lusinghier": <http://youtu.be/arPbTyj08sY>.

This Saturday, April 18th at 12:30 p.m., we're rebroadcasting the Metropolitan Opera's February 5, 2011 performance of Giuseppe Verdi's *Simon Boccanegra*, a compelling portrayal of a man who is both a leader and an outsider in one of the most incisive depictions of politics ever put on the stage. **Dmitri Hvorostovsky** sings the title role and **Barbara Frittoli** is his long-lost daughter Amelia Grimaldi. Heard in other principal roles are **Ramón Vargas** (Gabriele Adorno), **Nicola Alaimo** (Paolo), and **Ferruccio Furlanetto** (Jacopo Fiesco). **James Levine** conducts.

Please join me next Thursday, April 23rd, for Francis Poulenc's *Dialogues des Carmélites*, which tells the story of a young noblewoman who—during the French Revolution—becomes a nun against the wishes of her father and brother. **Catherine Dubosc** portrays Sister Blanche of the Agony of Christ after joining a Carmelite convent where she can live and work without fear. After a mob attacks the convent, the nuns accept martyrdom. Also heard are **Rita Gorr** (Madame de Croissy), **Brigitte Fournier** (Sister Constance), **Rachal Yakar** (Madame Lidoine), **José Van Dam** (Marquis), and **Jean Luc Viala** (Chevalier). **Kent Nagano** conducts this 1993 recording.

The WCPE Opera House is heard every Thursday evening at 7 o'clock in the Eastern time zone on 89.7 FM in central North Carolina. We're streamed online world-wide at <http://www.theclassicalstation.org>, and you can listen on WCPE's Android or iPhone apps.

Bob Chapman

W. Robert Chapman, Host of the WCPE Opera House