

theartsdesk at the Ravenna Festival - invisible cities and possible dreams

Submitted by [David Nice](#) on Mon, 17/07/2023 - 00:40



ZaniCasadio

Came for the music, returned for the theatre. I oversimplify: Riccardo Muti's *Roads of Friendship* events, meetings of his Luigi Cherubini Youth Orchestra with players from other places – since 1997, they have included Sarajevo, Lebanon, Kenya, Iran and this year Jordan – will always be the big cornerstones of the [Ravenna](#) Festival.

Yet since I joined Teatro delle Albe's big collaborations with local citizens in 2019's *Purgatorio*, second instalment of their Dante *Divina Commedia* triptych finally completed, after Covid interruptions, last year, this unique, highest level [dramatic](#) experience has become an essential date in the calendar.

You could argue that Don Quixote's quest for the numinous – Cervantes' novel, one to be re-read every 10 years in/among my books, is the basis for these amazing Thespians' latest triptych – links with this year's festival theme, "Invisible Cities", homaging the centenary of Italo Calvino's birth. But doesn't all great art? Based in a city threatened, like Venice, with immersion – this spring's flood waters stopped nearly at the gates –

and concealing paradises behind ordinary brick walls, every performance at the wide-ranging can reinforce that sense of the limitless. All three main events which I attended absolutely did. This festival has the best of both worlds. For Italians, it's a chance to catch international visitors – not so important for your roving reporter, who needs something relatively local. Beatrice Rana (**pictured above** by WagnerMela, photographers for this event, on the right with dancers and fellow pianist Massimo Spada) is, of course, one of the finest living pianists but also happens born in southern Italy.

A solo Rachmaninov recital might not be worth the travel, but this “Evening of Music and Dance” for the 150th anniversary certainly was. The dance element could have been a risk, and started with Uwe Scholz’s relatively conventional Pas de deux to the Andante of Rachmaninov’s Cello Sonata as played by the Rana sisters (Ludovica is a cellist, and it was hard to gauge the real quality of her tone given the first of many problems with amplification under the dome of the vast Palazzo Mauro de André). The second choreography by Scholz – he died far too young in 2004 – was much more original. In this, Italian Rachele Buriassi and Cuban Esnel Ramos of Les Grands Ballets Canadiens were joined by Kyiv Opera House’s Oleksii Potiomkin in wiry, acrobatic-poetic interweavings to the Andantino from the Second Suite for Two Pianos (**pictured above**), Massimo Spada now joining Beatrice Rana. Their biggest challenge, surmounted with fleet brilliance, was the composer’s two-piano version of his last major masterpiece, the Symphonic Dances. Here inventiveness took a further step in chameleonic choreography from the superlative team of Simone Repele and Sasha Riva, also dancing in the 10-strong ensemble. Anna Biagotti’s costumes helped with the gender melt here; a colleague thought it was all too much indebted to Balanchine, but the vocabulary of Repele and Riva goes even further.

Some sequences were counter-intuitive: reprises relatively immobile or pared-down compared to the original wild patternings, shouts, stamps, playfulness with giant hands in the eerie central waltz – suggestive of Rachmaninov’s own eleven-note spreads? – not overdone. And the cumulative power of the final “midnight” sequence showed in the dancing as well as the playing. Fokine might have choreographed the composer’s work, along with the Paganini Rhapsody; I think he would have been impressed by this. The two youngish choreographers have worked with director Damiano Michieletto on Bernstein’s *Mass in Rome’s Baths of Caracalla*; I’d like to see more of that collaboration. The next evening gave us the first concert in this year’s partnership between the Luigi Cherubini Youth Orchestra, Ravenna-dwelling, Neapolitan born Riccardo Muti’s special Italian project, and a group of musicians from a significant

elsewhere, his biggest contribution to the Ravenna Festival since the support for Sarajevo began it all 26 years ago. In addition to the Coro Cremona Antiqua, 2023's "Roads of Friendship" led to Jordan, with a crucial component of Syrian artists. After the grand opening (**pictured below** by ZaniCasadio, photographers for this event) Two nights later the team performed in the amphitheatre at the not-quite invisible city of Jerash, all too close to Za'atari, the UNHCR "city of refugees", and after that in Pompeii as temperatures in Italy started soaring (it was 37 degrees in Bologna on the evening I left). Muti's programme was rich and strange, with a preponderance of slow music, all of it aspiring heavenwards even if we began in Hades with the Furies and Spectres of Gluck's Orfeo ed Euridice Act Two. The conductor's view is marmoreal rather than blazing, chorus likewise, but there was full physical involvement from countertenor Filippo Mineccia. Just one oddity: if you're only going to perform an act, why be purist about Gluck's original version, which deprives us of the sublime flute solo in the new later central section of the "Dance of the Blessed Spirits"?

That absence was all the more to be lamented when the flautist, Chiari Picchi, sang so beautifully at the start of Bellini's "Casta diva", supported ineffably by a master conductor of the bel canto repertoire. The Norma was a more than promising young soprano, Cuban-American Monica Conesa, but her Callas-like vibrancy in the middle register had an asperity surely due to the amplification, which later gave stand-out strings overdue prominence. It was all necessary for the Jordanian-Syrian intermezzo, for which Muti took a back seat. Fit company for Gluck and Bellini was Dima Orsbo's *Ula-Ikal Mansiyouna ala difaf al furat*, setting an ancient poem from an area between the Tigris and the Euphrates, with a simple descending passacaglia figure repeating beneath vocal and instrumental melismas. Both vocalists, Syrian-born and Italian-based countertenor Razek-François Bitar and Jordanian Zain Awad, soaring into the stratosphere but also going beneath her companion's line, delivered the highest artistry. So too did Syrian Mirna Kassis and Jordanian Ady Naber, but their numbers were pop songs: fair enough in a musical interlude. Muti, the Cremona choir and the mixed orchestra signed off with more deepest seriousness – Brahms's *Schicksalslied (Song of Destiny)*, a work I only knew from late, lamented Abbado's recording and had never heard live before. Hölderlin's inspirational poem contrasts heavenly light with blind sufferings on earth below, ending pessimistically, but Brahms finally decided to reprise the luminous orchestral opening in a different key. Few living conductors can make it glow and float as Muti did: a perfect peace to end a supernaturally beautiful programme.

At the beginning of the latest unique experience from theatrical legends Marco

Martinelli and Ermanna Montanari (**pictured right** by Marco Caselli, photographer for this event), *Don Chisciotte Ad Ardere*, we were invited by Sibilline sorceress Hermanita, appearing at the central balcony of the Palazzo Malagola, to enter into mysteries. Her hypnotising language, breaking off the ends of Italian words, was – Marco later told me – based on the similar Spanish masquerade Cervantes executes in his poetic epigraphs. But of La Mancha’s Knight of the Woeful Countenance there was at first no sign.

Ravenati working at sewing machines or writing out their dreams to give to us occupied the entrance hall, their activity punctuated by Sephardic-Andalusian and Calabiran songs from Serena Abrami; the 50 spectators sitting on benches were led in small groups to the different rooms of the palace, the Teatro dell’Albe’s Centre for Vocal studies opposite their converted-church theatre, which I’d been able to inspect last year.

What a visionary transformation – a sequence of surreal tableaux, or at least scenes surreally lit and “staged”, including a family around a table eating soup with knives, chickens present in a coop; girls building a sandcastle intermittently revealed in a “magic mirror; a mermaid in the attic (**pictured below**); a woman with a meat cleaver surrounded by stinking meat. Released into the palazzo garden with its big trees, we found the “enchanted palace” was only an inn, transformed for us by Quixote’s imagination. We sat and waited for the other groups to complete their circuit, listening to spectral-violent music by the band Leda. Then our “sorcerers”, “Hermanita” and “Marcus”, began the narrative, and we met our Quixote, looking dreamily into space (Roberto Magnani), his Sancho (Alessandro Argnani) and his Dulcinea (Laura Redaelli) as the down-to-earth village woman. Magnani and Argnani have been in the company since they were teenagers. We were not to believe who they said they were. And the episodes from Cervantes’ novel were punctuated by contemporary references. We did get at length the encounter with the chain-gang prisoners Quixote releases (pictured above). The “amateurs” who’d signed up to the public call, dressed in white as they had been in the Dante sequence started with a 17th century rave (**pictured below**), but many participated in an astonishing glossolalia led by Montanari, and later had solo speeches. These were professional actors, surely? Mostly not; they had simply been trained in voice production over months – the biggest step forward Martinelli and Montanari have taken so far. The culmination of Part One was cued by the way in which Quixote’s neighbours accused his library of turning his wits. How many classic works might be burnt because we don’t like an aspect of the author? The “reasonable” crowd turned feral and threw down texts by Saul Bellow and Simone Weil, for example. “It always starts like this”, cautioned Hermanita. “They begin with burning books and end

up burning men, women and children”. End of Part One, and a much friendlier invitation for us “wanderers” to meet individuals in the crowd. This is Utopian theatre, and the invitation to return to Ravenna’s streets in 2024 for Part Two won’t be ignored.

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