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A Singer's Notes 37: Risk and Ease – Cherubini's Medea at Glimmerglass, Handel's Orlando at Tanglewood

Posted by [Keith Kibler](#) • August 28, 2011 • [Printer-friendly](#)



Alexandra Deshorties as Medea with the Argonauts in The Glimmerglass Festival's 2011 production of Cherubini's Medea. Photo Julieta Cervantes.

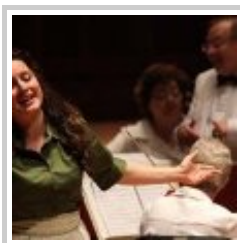
Artists like Maria Callas and Vladimir Horowitz seemed to possess as part of their formidable arsenals a kind of palpable risk-taking. Could he actually play it that fast? Could she really get the high note? Alexandra Deshorties is one of these artists. Her performance in the title role of Glimmerglass Festival Opera's *Medea* was a real thrill-ride. She entered barely audible, and she made us listen. More than once it seemed like the role was a little much for her. But then it wasn't. Was this consciously done? Whatever it was, it made the first act of the opera riveting, not just the end. If a word doesn't make

a beautiful sound, she doesn't compel her voice to make a beautiful sound. Her way of gesturing, equally unpredictable, produced visible responses in the audience members around me. In short, this is my kind of singer. A complete singing actress, one who knows how singing makes words live, and how to use the slowness of most operatic utterances to her advantage. Like most acute artists of this type, she is just as involving when she isn't singing as when she is. David Pittsinger made Creon a credible character with the beauty and precision of his singing. Usually a stand and deliver role, he made it more than that. Perhaps best of all was the new young conductor, Daniele Rustioni. The first indication of his strength was the response I saw from the orchestra players when he entered the pit. He led with passion, something I haven't always seen in the pit of this opera house. In short, he got them to play, and he clearly believed in the opera. Papa Haydn believed in Cherubini and shepherded his work. I can't say that the opera as a whole keeps me with it, but it has good things, and when one has a singing actress like Deshorties, it can be raised up and become aware of its own pathos. A great singer is required. I can think of few operas so dependent as this score on one singer. The risk-taking is built in.

There was mastery in the Philharmonia Baroque Orchestra's performance of Handel's "Orlando" in Ozawa Hall. American early music players have reached something like a pinnacle of accomplishment. The players in the Boston Early Music Festival Orchestra play with more raw energy, but Nicholas McGegan's Philharmonia plays with more ease. Both play at the top level of technical accomplishment. How different this is from the early music bands I heard in the '70's- not always the best players, not always well-rehearsed, some folk at that time disdaining a finished performance. No—the concert in Ozawa Hall showed me more about the 18th century and what it can be, what its true power of expression was, than many another performance of Baroque music. First of all, the singing was sublime. First among equals was the inimitable Dominique Labelle. Ms. Labelle has a way of finishing her phrases which makes them hang there. I could swear she was still singing a couple of times after a phrase finished. Her singing always reminds me of the tale of Echo, a Baroque favorite, in that the actual beauty of it seems to linger beyond its own life. She is one of my favorite singers. Yulia Van Doren made a wholly sympathetic character of Dorinda, a miracle of a role in which Handel shows an ordinary girl to have the deepest heart of all the persons on stage. Her singing, especially in the decorations she devised, those parts of the role with no accompaniment, had the ability to pull this listener far into the sadness of the character. It was not a light soprano kind of performance. It was a big luscious performance. Each of the other performers was excellent in his or her vocalism and stylistic awareness. This was quite simply a performance without a flaw.

The maestro barely conducts—a wave of a hand, the nod of his head gets his superb bunch going, and then they just sail on their own magnificent expertise. They show us that decorum is a passionate choice and that an elevated style that is capable of heart-rending truth. *Orlando* was one of the two or three best things I have heard this summer.

You might like:



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A Singer's Notes 34: Early Listening



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