

The Baroque Festival

Opera

Concluding the recent Baroque festival, the Manoel Theatre, in collaboration with the Istituto Italiano di Cultura, presented Pergolesi's stage masterpiece *La Serva Padrona* at the Manoel to a pretty numerous audience. I had seen this work just once before: it was at the erstwhile Radio City opera house back in the late 1950s.

One's memories, no matter how youthful, perforce fade after more than 40 years but the amazing cheek and freshness of the saucy maid Serpina are not easily forgettable. They were successfully revived as far as I was concerned by Marcello Ancilotti, who also doubled as the bumbling Vespone, a mute part Servant and accomplice of Serpina's and privy to her scheming in bagging/trapping her 'master' Uberto into marrying her.

The Venetian chamber orchestra *L'Offerta Musicale* was conducted by Riccardo Paravicini. Lithe and elegantly stylish they provided continuous support to this delicious romp that does not seem to age. That despite its intrinsic idiosyncracies which at times could seem almost too repetitive, to the extent that one finds the vivacious lengthy recitative passages far more interesting and revealing.

A small cast, a work on a small scale because after all this is only an *intermezzo a due*, often meant to provide lighter contrasts during evenings when jaded tastes and appetites needed some relief from heavier stuff inhabited by classical and mythological heroes up to their incredible tricks. Soprano Giuseppina Brienza's Serpina was excellent, so good that it almost made me resent her extreme bossiness, to the point of exasperation. On the other hand, baritone Davide Paltretti's Uberto was equally convincing that at first one felt sorry for him, for not standing up to his maid's bullying and blandishments.

Such was the characterisation the pair projected. Their technical endowments are considerable, and while like Paltretti's vocal qualities at all times, for his timbre is warm and delivery very smooth, it took me some time to get used to Brienza's sometimes strident top which eventually mellowed into something more agreeable in the second part of the work.

Her '*Serpina penserete*' was most winning and so were the duets with Uberto, especially the last extended one with various sections of the orchestra imitating the prospective couple's beating hearts. For in the end she wins her man, helped in part by Vespone's masquerading as Captain Tempesta. This was one of the funniest scenes of all.

A sparsely effective set and judicious light effects continued to create the right atmosphere, as after all, did the theatre itself, a jewel of the Baroque.