

because she's happy

by [Hans Lick](http://parterre.com/author/hans-lick/) | 11:34 am | Mar 16, 2016



[undefined] There are two kinds of opera lovers: Those who despise or tolerate *La Gioconda* as a preposterous rip-off of *Aida* that lingered a century in the repertory in spite of its galumphing story, largely because of the popularity of its tuneful ballet—and *true* opera lovers. *We* love every silly note of the thing, and every ridiculous plot device.

The plot is actually very tight; there's just one big oops: How does Gioconda know that Alvise is going to order Laura to drink poison, thereby giving Gioconda time to procure an imitation poison? Look: Don't even think about it. It's grand opera.

Now that the grand opera companies of the world no longer present *La Gioconda* (to be fair, they haven't got the singers to do it justice, the old-fashioned, gutsy "I'll get that high note if I burst a blood vessel to do it" kind, have they?), we, the true opera lovers, miss it. Handel is good, Cavalli is talented and Glass is promising, but they aren't Ponchielli.

This situation should affront anyone devoted to *Parterre Box* and its *doyen*, the *second* Mrs. Tanqu—I mean, La Cieca.

Opera Company of Brooklyn which, its name notwithstanding, operates in the northwesternmost corner of Manhattan, came to the rescue last Saturday night. OCB performs in a large living room, on-book with piano accompaniment but no sets or costumes—or props, and props are so important in *La Gioconda*: poisons, masks, rosaries, daggers.

The singers get two rehearsals plus a few coaching sessions and the right to say they've sung the role, whatever role it is, on the résumé thereafter. Soloists join in to perform choral parts. No one performed "The Dance of the Hours." (The friends I'd

brought suggested that the three of us improvise it, since we resemble hippopotami in tutus.)

What you get here is well-trained young voices blasting the score into your face at fairly close quarters, plus a BYOB spread of nibbles. If you like hearing an opera score live, up close and personal, this is the place. And the repertory is exceptional. Last time I went, they did *The Rake's Progress*. Next up, in April, is *Die Walküre* (slightly cut), part of an ongoing *Ring* cycle. Performances are conducted by the OCB's spunky director, **Jay Meetze**. For *La Gioconda*, they were plot summaries before each act to confuse you further. (Mine, actually, channeling my inner Anna Russell.)

La Gioconda is a night of six stars. It doesn't work if you skimp on them, as the Met found out when they attempted to revive it as a vehicle for **Ewa Podles**. **Elizabeth Shoup**, who has a deep and powerful soprano of great solidity up to the top of the staff, sang *Gioconda* with great force and bite and a strong, even sound, though her top notes and soft singing seemed under-supported.

Laura Flaxman sang *Laura Adorno* (is *Laura* a descendant of the entire cast of *Simon Boccanegra*? Probably), with a sizable and attractive instrument. There were some wavering pitches, but she rose to the challenge of her duets with Enzo and *Gioconda* in Act II. **Kristin Starkey** sang *La Cieca* with a genuine plummy contralto that warmed the heart.

Tenor **Lindell O. Carter**—a last-minute replacement, but we're not supposed to know that—just imagine ransacking New York for an Enzo at the last minute—well, they found one!—gave us an inspiring "Cielo e mar," off-book, and for the rest, having first seen the score two days earlier, sang from his iPad like a true professional. It's difficult to play a hotheaded lover while reading from an iPad, but his performance was so ardent and involved that we soon forgot about it. Once or twice a high note was replaced by a lower one, but they were good notes and only those familiar with recordings noticed.

David Tapp, a baritone of genuine distinction, sang and snarled *Barnaba*, the spy who drives the whole crazy plot, with distinction and malice. His "Pescator! Affonda l'esca" was suave, room-filling, beautifully phrased, and the sarcasm of his repeated "Buona fortuna," sung to each of his dupes in turn, curdled the blood. Mr. Tapp sings as often in musicals as in opera, and his acting chops are well-honed. (Does one hone a chop?) But his excellent voice should not be hidden behind a microphone; he will essay *Wotan* for OCB.

Paul Goodwin-Groen, who looks as imposing as he sounds, was an egregiously menacing *Alvise Badoer*. **Julio Hernandez** and **Ivan Amaro** divvied up the supporting roles and the soloists gamely took on the chorus and offstage parts.

Lucas Barkley was the expert and atmospheric pianist.

The evening was rich in the sensual pleasure of able singers tearing with into a score whose justification lies in providing delight.

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