

Cultural Daily

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Rarely Performed Iris Blooms at Bard

David Sheward · Wednesday, July 27th, 2016

Pietro Mascagni's rarely performed 1898 opera *Iris* receives a magnificent production at Bard College's annual Summerscape Festival, revealing a hidden treasure overshadowed by the composer's politics and the similar *Madama Butterfly* by Mascagni's friend and one-time roommate, Giacomo Puccini. Both works share a librettist, take place in Japan, a location of exotic fascination in the late 19th century, and center on an innocent young woman who meets her end due to the careless egotism of male seducers. *Iris* preceded *Butterfly* and was initially received better. Mascagni's sumptuous, lyrical score influenced Puccini; he even borrowed the idea of a humming chorus. Mascagni's music remains fresh and enchanting featuring innovations such as a teacup balanced on a violin to produce an eerie tinkling sound. But Puccini's later work featured more diva-centric arias and melodramatic moments, becoming a beloved choice of stars and audiences. *Iris* is more integrated and lacking in show-stoppers, plus Mascagni's enthusiastic support of Mussolini alienated European and American opera bigwigs after World War II and this lovely gem was confined to a back shelf.



Talise Trevigne in *Iris* at Bard SummerScape.

Credit: Corey Weaver

Fortunately, director James Darrah and conductor-music director Leon Botstein have rescued the damsel from her dusty closet. Eschewing kimonos, elaborate wigs, and kabuki movement, set designers Emily Anne MacDonald and Cameron Jay Mock and costume designer Peabody Southwell have placed the story in a surreal, dream-like world where Iris is abducted from the simple home of her blind father by the pimp Kyoto and the rich young man Osaka who is enraptured by her innocent beauty. She is taken to Yoshiwara, the red-light district of Tokyo—the sets and costumes here resemble the futuristic milieu of Fritz Lang's sci-fi silent classic *Metropolis*. After rejecting Osaka's advances, Iris jumps into the sewer and perishes as she moves towards a beam of sunlight glistening in the darkness.

Soprano Talise Trevigne delivers a shattering, soaring performance in the title role. Her clear, liquid tones and her straightforward acting avoid the tearjerking usually associated with *Butterfly*. Tenor Gerard Schneider lends great variety and range to Osaka's pleas for Iris's favors and bass-baritone Douglas Williams makes for a devilishly attractive, dark-hued Kyoto (the characters were symbolically named for Japanese cities.) Matthew Boehler is piteously evocative as Iris's desperate father.

Darrah creates numerous stunning stage pictures, supplemented by Neil Peter Jameolis's lighting. These include the stunning opening scenes in the heroine's garden featuring a stage awash in brilliant color and falling petals; Iris's long, Alice-in-Wonderland descent into the sewer; and her

final ascent on a mountain of trash towards the redeeming light. Let's hope that the long-neglected *Iris* rejoins the repertoire of major opera houses for it has glorious music and many vocal opportunities.

July 22—31. Sosnoff Theatre, Richard Fisher Center for the Performing Arts, Bard College, Annandale-on-Hudson, NY. Fri. 7:30 pm; Wed, Sun, 2 pm. Running time: two hours and 45mins. including intermission. \$25—\$110. (845) 758-7900. www.fishercenter.bard.edu/summerscape

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