



'La Hija de Rappaccini' flowers in the Brooklyn Botanic Garden

June 20, 2013 – By James Jorden

A contemporary take on a classic horror story blossomed into an evening of al fresco music Monday when Gotham Chamber Opera performed “La Hija de Rappaccini” on the grounds of the Brooklyn Botanic Garden.

In Daniel Catán’s 1996 opera, modeled on Nathaniel Hawthorne’s creepy tale “Rappaccini’s Daughter,” a scientist fascinated by deadly plants feeds their toxins to his daughter Beatriz. As a result of this experiment, she is immune to poison, but her touch can kill.

Echoes of Debussy and Ravel shimmer in Catán’s orchestra harmonies.

The nonstop thrumming and tinkling evokes nighttime noises in the mysterious garden — or possibly the feverish dreams of the student Giovanni, who’s glimpsed the beautiful Beatriz in her garden prison and fallen in love with her.



Richard Termine

Colorful flower-women enhance the visual experience of “La Hija de Rappaccini” at the Brooklyn Botanic Garden.

The challenging vocal parts span wide ranges in tricky rhythms, but there’s not much in the way of melody until midway through the opera, when the love-struck Giovanni bursts into a throbbing aria as luscious as anything in Puccini’s “Tosca.”

This number, radiantly sung by lyric tenor Daniel Montenegro, stopped the show Monday night, with the audience of more than 800 shouting “bravo” from their blankets on the lawn.

As Beatriz, Elaine Alvarez unfurled a colorful soprano, even if she made a blandly statuesque femme fatale, and Eric Dubin surged confidently to the top of his baritone range as the mad doctor. While fine tenor Brian Downen had little to do as Giovanni’s mentor, Jessica Grigg deployed her tangy mezzo to create a sharp cameo as a meddling landlady.

The “garden of evil” setting of the opera proved a perfect fit for the Botanic Garden’s lush Cherry Esplanade, with a gorgeous sunset over Park Slope and even a few unscripted bird chirps lending atmosphere to director Rebecca Taichman’s elegantly straightforward production.

Adding visual variety to the static libretto, she brought Catán’s trio of offstage voices into full view as seductive flower-women, their swirling bouffant gowns revealing petticoats in vibrant colors.

Gotham’s artistic director, Neal Goren, conducted with crisp precision a chamber combo of two pianos and percussion, plus an elaborate harp part played here with adroit virtuosity by Andrea Puente Catán, the composer’s widow.

It was barely dark as the opera ended, and if the walk out of the park felt just the tiniest bit scary, that’s a testament to the emotional power of “La Hija de Rappaccini.”

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