

# *Superconductor*

## **Opera Review: She's Toxic, He's Slipping Under** **Gotham Chamber Opera presents *La Hija de Rappaccini*.**

Tuesday, July 18, 2013 - By Paul J. Pelkonen



Pretty poison: Elaine Alvarez is Beatriz in *La Hija de Rappaccini*.

*Photo by Richard Termine © 2013 Gotham Chamber Opera.*

The opera season may be at its end, but New York's opera lovers have a few more treats in store. On Monday night, Gotham Chamber Opera unveiled its *al fresco* production of Daniel Catán's 1988 opera *La Hija de Rappaccini* (*Rappaccini's Daughter*.) This Spanish-language opera is not new to New Yorkers, but this is a new production, presented on the Cherry Esplanade at the heart of the Brooklyn Botanic Garden.

Based on a short story by Nathaniel Hawthorne and a subsequent dramatic adaptation by playwright Octavio de la Paz, *Rappaccini* is a Gothic thriller set in the sensual, often deadly world of a mad scientist's poisonous garden. As in Wagner's *Parsifal*, the central floral creation of Rappaccini's garden is a woman--the titular Beatriz. Her father has made her a sheltered innocent, who happens to be so toxic that her mere caress causes illness. Unlike Kundry, she is a

victim of her father's machinations who eventually meets her death when she drinks an antidote intended to save the hero from her deadly touch.

Although she has the title role, soprano Elaine Alvarez doesn't get a lot of music to sing. However, the soprano makes the most of her lush entry in the first act and her subsequent duet with her decidedly mad father. The love scene in Act II echoes Wagner again--with hints of *Tristan* and *Parsifal* accompanying a romantic, Shakespearean innocence in the text. Her flowery *liebestod* at the end of the second Act combines sadness, suicide and sense of resignation. Here, Catán's sensitive music evoked the end of Strauss' *Daphne*, another short opera whose heroine has a similar obsession with botany.

The major vocal find here was tenor Daniel Montenegro. His heroic performance as Giovanni evoked sympathy while providing florid detail and a potent, bright instrument. This young man displayed ringing clarity and power, and might have sounded even better if he weren't amplified. His aria during the Act I dream sequence was a *tour-de-force*, drawing an ovation from the crowd assembled on the grassy lawn.

Baritone Eric Dubin was an imposing presence as the mad Rappaccini, whose mad-scientist machinations are the motivation behind this tragic story. His obsession with poisons and psychopathic amorality reminded this writer of Ian Fleming's book version of *You Only Live Twice* where James Bond's nemesis Ernst Stavro Blofeld has devolved into the manager of a garden of poisonous plants. Tenor Brian Downen played the good Doctor Baglioni, whose efforts to save Giovanni ultimately doom Beatriz. Mezzo Jessica Grigg sang Isabella with sweetness and lucidity. She is the maid who brings the lovers together.

Catán's music is sensuous and lush, although presented here in a reduced orchestration that made one long for a lush thicket of strings and double winds. Problems with the amplification made the harp and piano dominate the ensemble to an almost unfair degree. Neal Goren proved his expertise on the podium, drawing rich emotions from the musicians despite the Spartan reduction of the score.

The setting was simple and effective. A white cast-iron bed represented Giovanni's student lodgings, while a sloped red disk (very Wieland Wagner, that!) stood in for Rappaccini's deadly garden. The incongruity of a gold-leafed tree in the middle of the Botanic Garden's carefully cultivated wonders emphasized the alien nature of Rappaccini's experiments and the scientist's corruption of the natural world for his own personal ends. The singers moved, dream-like through the cherry trees, adding to the surreal beauty of a perfect summer evening in Brooklyn.

*La Hija de Rappacini* returns June 24 for one more performance. June 25 is the alternate date in the event of inclement weather.