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## Reviews

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# A rare performance of a Haydn opera

by Fred Haight

Baltimore audiences were given a rare treat on Nov. 18 and 20, 1994 by the Peabody Opera Theater's performance of Joseph Haydn's 1781 opera, *La Fedeltà Premiata*. Although Haydn wrote 20 operas, they were unknown until after World War II when they were dug up by H.C. Robbins-Landon and recorded by the late Antal Dorati.

Still, they are seldom performed. The usual excuse is that they are inferior because they were commissioned by the Esterhazy court, Haydn's full-time employer for whom he had to mass-produce music, and he thus supposedly had little time for the type of productive relationship with a librettist that Mozart had with Lorenzo da Ponte.

The artistic director, Roger Brunyate, claims that Haydn was not very concerned with finding a good libretto, and decided to use one previously set by Domenico Cimarosa. He is correct in saying that in Mozart's operas, drama and music are completely integrated; and that, in comparison with Mozart's operas, many of the situations in *La Fedeltà* seem contrived, even arbitrary, but that Haydn manages to uplift the work with some very beautiful music. He is wrong, however, in saying that Haydn had little interest in the libretto, and was more interested in portraying the "feelings" of each character with very different arias for each. (This emphasis on the primacy of feelings is a concession to modernism, as is the translation of the title as *The Perils of Fidelity* instead of the usual *Fidelity Rewarded*.)

Haydn's genius, which is reflected in the individual arias, is seen in the process of transformation which is the single indivisible concept of the work as a whole. This springs from a process of moral transformation that is clear in the libretto, despite its dramatic weaknesses.

This reviewer was struck by the similarities between this work and Mozart's *Idomeneo*, written in 1780-81, at the same time as *La Fedeltà*. The year 1781 was also the year of Haydn's *Motivführung* breakthrough in his Op. 33 string quartets, a breakthrough to which Mozart responded with his six quartets dedicated to Haydn. The similarities between *La Fedeltà* and Mozart's *Die Zauberflöte* (*The Magic Flute*), written a decade afterward, are striking.

In both, a virtuous couple must undergo a test of their faith. In the latter, Tamino must observe a vow of silence

toward his beloved Pamina, even though it leads her to contemplate suicide, thinking that he does not love her. In *La Fedeltà*, Celia must pretend not to love Fileno, for the goddess Diana has demanded the sacrifice of a faithful couple to a sea monster. Two other couples, at a lower moral level, are constantly philandering, but in the end are uplifted by the actions of Celia and Fileno. As in *Die Zauberflöte*, each character has a different type of aria, which reflects not merely their feeling-states, but different levels of emotional-moral development. The vain and arrogant Amaranta develops throughout the opera, but the Papageno-like Count Perrucchetto never rises above his lust for "earthly paradise," and Lindoro's arias retain the quality of a lovesick adolescent. These characters are raised to a higher level, not by their own efforts, but by others' virtue, in parallel to Papageno in *Die Zauberflöte*.

Celia and Fileno remain faithful, yet Celia never gives in to vindictiveness, as does Fileno, when, after she pretends not to love him, he pretends to love Nerina, and says to Celia, "Now you will see how it feels to suffer." Soon after, he is ready to kill himself, ostensibly because of a broken heart, but despair is a sin, and vindictiveness is self-destructive. Celia, however, after finding his suicide note carved in a tree, sings that it is her fault for being cruel to him, even though she did it to save his life. The noblest souls are always the readiest to accept responsibility.

The idea of pagan gods demanding a sacrifice is often "Christianized" and transformed into a test of faith by great artists. In Greek mythology, the goddess Artemis (Diana) demanded, and got, Agamemnon's sacrifice of his daughter Iphigenia, in exchange for fair weather to set sail for Troy.

In the Old Testament, Jehovah wanted not blood, but faith, and though he demanded Abraham's sacrifice of his son Isaac, sent an angel at the last moment to stop it.

In *La Fedeltà* and *Idomeneo*, the New Testament idea of a sacrifice of love replaces mere obedience. Thus Diana, the goddess of chastity, is appeased when Fileno offers to lay down his life to save Celia. The sacrifice is annulled, and the evil priest Melibeo is dealt with. This action by Fileno brings order and harmony. Infatuation is dispelled, and the couples reunited.

This work continued to play to sold-out audiences in Vienna under Emmanuel Schikaneder, a participant in Mozart and Benjamin Franklin's anti-oligarchist faction of Masonry, which was pro-American Revolution. He wrote the libretto for *Die Zauberflöte*, commissioned Mozart to write the music, and performed it. Undoubtedly, *La Fedeltà Premiata* was one of his inspirations, too.

The singing by Peabody Conservatory students was of a very high standard, the direction good, and the orchestra played beautifully under choral conductor Edward Polochik. The participants reported that working on the opera was an uplifting experience. The singers said that it "really made them want to sing" (not as easy as it may sound). Let us hope that this work receives more exposure.