

The New York Times

A Madwoman Lets It Rip

Anna Caterina Antonacci in 'Era la Notte' at Lincoln Center



Karsten Moran for The New York Times

Anna Caterina Antonacci at the Rose Theater.

By [ANTHONY TOMMASINI](#)

The extraordinary Italian soprano [Anna Caterina Antonacci](#) has [concentrated her career](#) in Europe. Each appearance she makes in America, like her [New York recital debut](#) last year at Alice Tully Hall, is coveted by opera fans familiar with her intelligent and charismatic artistry.

So it was on Wednesday when an audience at the Rose Theater waited expectantly for Ms. Antonacci to present the American premiere of “Era la Notte,” a dramatic staging of four 17th-century Italian vocal works, lasting just over an hour and fashioned by this imaginative artist and the director Juliette Deschamps into a portrait of characters confronting love, abandonment, senseless combat and death.

When Ms. Antonacci finally appeared onstage, she looked like a madwoman. That was the idea.

The mood for “Era la Notte” (“It Was the Night”), presented here as part of Lincoln Center’s White Light Festival, was set by the musicians, soloists from the period-instrument orchestra Les Siècles, who played a subdued, dancelike passacalio by Biagio Marini.

The simple set (by Cécile Degos) was dominated by a trellis in the rear, with rows of lighted candles. At the front of the stage was a shallow pool of water. Ms. Antonacci, wearing a rumpled cream-colored gown with gold embroidery, carried a bucket and some motley rags, like a fine lady who thinks herself a crazed washerwoman.

She then began a lament by Pietro Antonio Giramo in which the singer portrays a woman driven to irrational despair by the affliction of love. In the text (with English translations projected in supertitles), the woman says that she lacks the words, the music, to explain her feelings. Only her fury can break through the confusion.

The music is a classic example of the early-17th-century Italian penchant for exploring extremes of expression with vocal lines that alternately swoon, cry and sigh, and agitated instrumental writing. Ms. Antonacci eschewed conventionally beautiful singing to get at the emotional intensity of the music: longing, pain, even moments of futile fantasy.

Selected instrumental pieces by Marini were used as transitions between the other vocal works. The second one was Monteverdi’s “Lamento d’Arianna,” which is the lament of the mythical title character, who has been abandoned by her lover, Theseus. Ms. Antonacci sang it with a real white bird sitting on her extended finger, seemingly entranced by the singing until she ushered it into a small cage.

In the third piece, “Lagrimie mie,” a lyrically elegant yet fraught vocal cantata by Barbara Strozzi, one of the very few published female composers from that era, Ms. Antonacci portrayed a man embittered by the indifference of the lovely Lidia.

The riveting conclusion of “Era la Notte” came with Ms. Antonacci’s performance of Monteverdi’s “Combattimento di Tancredi e Clorinda,” an 18-minute tour de force from the composer’s Eighth Book of Madrigals. The piece tells the story, taken from Tasso’s epic poem “Gerusalemme Liberata,” of the Christian knight Tancredi, who falls in love with Clorinda, a warrior-maiden, a Saracen, who joins the Muslim forces.

During a fierce night battle, Clorinda, dressed as a man, is fatally wounded by Tancredi, who is horrified to discover her identity. With her last words, Clorinda asks to be baptized by Tancredi, which, she has come to believe, will save her spiritual life.

As performed by the arresting Ms. Antonacci, dressed in black pants and a shirt, wielding a sword, the metaphor of this work came through powerfully: love, especially when it involves breaching cultural differences, is the ultimate battle. The piece is mostly delivered in narrative vocal lines, with the dialogue of two lovers usually sung by two singers. Ms. Antonacci sang all the parts in her stunning performance. At the end, she collapsed into the pool of water, as real showers fell from above at the rear of the stage, snuffing out the candles.

She must come back to New York. The Metropolitan Opera should invite her to sing any role in any opera she wants.

The White Light Festival runs through Nov. 23 at various New York locations; 212-721-6500, whitelightfestival.org.

This article has been revised to reflect the following correction:

Correction: November 19, 2013

A music review on Friday about “Era la Notte,” a dramatic staging of four 17th-century Italian vocal works at the Rose Theater in Manhattan, referred incorrectly to the narrative part in one piece, “Combattimento di Tancredi e Clorinda” by Monteverdi. The lines are delivered by an unnamed narrator — not by a character named Testo, which is the Italian word for text.