

CONCERT REVIEW

Italian quintet hit the high notes

A group of operatic singers wowed audience members at Thailand Cultural Centre

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The 19th century so-called bel canto tradition was the principal focus of "Gala Italiano", an invigorating performance by the Bangkok Symphony Orchestra and a visiting quintet of Italian opera specialists on May 25 at Thailand Cultural Centre.



Conductor Carlo Magni brought with him the vocal delights of soprano Lucia Conte, mezzo-soprano Paola Cacciatori, tenor David Sotgiu and bass Giuseppe Ranoia, who all displayed finesse and drama in their delivery of the celebrated bel canto tradition which means, literally, "beautiful voice".

The first solo aria, *Una Furtiva Lagrima* from Donizetti's hilarious comic opera *L'Elisir D'Amore*, was delivered by tenor Sotgiu, and got the evening's singing off to a very good start with his velvety tone, echoed by a sultry bassoon solo at the end of the number. Then Conte performed the soprano solo *So Anch'io La Virtu Magica* from the same composer's *Don Pasquale*, displaying a powerful and highly penetrating voice which at one climax reached a shattering top C.

Rossini's well-loved, ravishing cavatina for mezzo-soprano from *Il Barbiere Di Siviglia*, *Una Voce Poco Fa*, was up next, introducing Cacciatori to the stage adorned in a shiny blood red dress. Demanding even more attention, though, was her magnificent coloratura technique, winning a loud cheer from the audience. Some sopranos have famously presumed to transpose this number in order to show off their even higher top notes, but here it was gratifyingly sung in the composer's original intended key of E major.

Last up for the solo arias in the first half of the show was another favourite classic from the same opera, the tempestuous yet cheeky *La Calunnia E Un Venticello*, in which imposing bass Ranoia made his presence truly felt. That he is a stage actor and director in addition to his singing career was most apparent in his rendering of the Rossini crescendo passages, at one point responding to the song's playfully menacing text by gesturing furiously around the concertmaster's head.

Ranoia possessed the strongest stage presence of the four soloists and sang another solo aria, *Mentre Gonfiarsi L'Anima* from Verdi's *Atilla*. Rather more deeply reflective, slower, and often pensive in character, this brooding basso profundo writing is occasionally reminiscent of the Commendatore from *Don Giovanni*, with ominous dissonant suspensions in the orchestra pervading the harmony. Here again, the singer brought moving charisma to the role.

The remainder of the programme consisted of classic operatic duets and ensemble quartets. Donizetti's *Verranno A Te Sull'aure* tenor and soprano duet from Lucia Di Lammermoor brought together Sotgiu and Conte for a few moments of convincing tender interaction, the diva this time appearing in a black dress with a diamond brooch.

Cacciatori also had a change of costume into turquoise blue for the following duet with Conte, Bellini's long and drawn out *Si, Fuggire: A Noi Non Resta* from *I Capuleti E I Montecchi*. In this setting of the Romeo And Juliet story it is the soprano who plays Romeo, requiring yet another change of outfit here — black boots, velvet black tuxedo and open-necked white shirt! In the concert hall in particular, such touches are in fact needed even more to give context to the storylines.

One of the principal quartets from the operatic repertoire, Verdi's *Un Di Se Ben Rammentomi* from *Rigoletto*, finally brought the ensemble together for a moving account. And after many proverbial curtain calls demanded by the satisfied audience, the last piece on the programme felt more like a celebratory encore.

Va, Pensiero, Sull'ali Dorate (commonly known as the Chorus Of The Hebrew Slaves) from Verdi's *Nabucco* is an almost anthemic rally call for oppressed masses everywhere, an instantly direct and poignant tune which had one humming it over again as the crowd left the theatre — a most fitting way to conclude this fine concert.

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