

Analysis: The Standouts From the Pietro Antonio Cesti International Singing Competition For Baroque Opera

By Alan Neilson



Photo: Innsbrucker Festwochen/ Die Fotografen

The winner of this year's "Pietro Antonio Cesti" International Singing Competition for Baroque Opera was won by the 30-year-old, Swiss soprano, Marie Lys.

Established in 2010 by Alessandro De Marchi, the incumbent artistic director of the Innsbruck Festival for Early Music, the competition has become an integral part of the festival, and certainly one of the most important singing competitions for early music in the world. This year, there were 74 contestants from 26 countries, which were eventually whittled down to 12 for the final, held on August 23, 2018. The finalists were comprised of five female and one male soprano, three countertenors, one tenor, one mezzo-soprano and one contralto.

The finalists sing two arias, one from Handel's "Ottone, re di Germania," and a second from a prescribed list. The contestants are judged by an eminent panel of early music experts.

The Winner

The overall standard of the competition was very high, although the winner, Marie Lys, eventually ran out the deserved winner. She opened the competition with Teofane's aria, "False imagine" from Handel's "Ottone," in which she feels deceived by the portrait of the man she is to marry. She produced an expressive, controlled rendition, which beautifully captured the disappointment that Teofane feels on seeing her future husband for the first time. Her vocal lines were tinged in melancholic reflection, gracefully phrased with subtle embellishments. She also brought the competition to a close with her second aria, "Scherza in mar" from Handel's "Lotario," in which Adelaide defiantly faces her imprisonment, and the prospect of death. This time her singing contained more drive and force as she raged against her situation. Again she displayed wonderful vocal control, the dynamic and tonal contrasts were wonderfully crafted, her singing full of audacious embellishments and topped by a scintillating coloratura display, full of energetic defiance.

Audience's Champion

The pairing of these two arias, "False imagine" and "Scherza in mar," was a popular choice for the sopranos; three opted for this combination, including, Theresa Pils, a 26-year-old, German soprano. Although she did not do enough to convince the judges, she certainly wowed the audience, and won the audience's vote for the best singer, and walked away with the €1,000 prize. Moreover, the audience's impression was confirmed, as she was also awarded the Resonanzen Prize, which apart from the prize of €1,500 includes a concert at the Resonanzen festival in Vienna. She also gave an excellent rendition of "Scherza in mar," which she sang with a greater degree of restraint, and brought greater emphasis to the aria's elegance and delicacy, as compared to Marie Lys' interpretation, but was, nevertheless, an equally pleasing reading. Likewise, she gave an intelligently nuanced and articulated performance of "False imagine," which highlighted the beauty of the aria and of her voice.

Second Prize

As runner-up to Marie Lys, was the 26 year old, Canadian countertenor, Cameron Shahbazi, who sang “Dove sei, dolce mia vita,” in which Ottone pines for the loss of Teofane. His interpretation captured Ottone’s devastation perfectly, as he span out heartfelt phrases, full of suffering and longing. He followed this with Bertarido’s aria, “Se fiera belva ha cinto” from Handel’s “Rodelinda,” in which he displayed the impressive versatility of his voice, including a captivating coloratura display.

Inseparable

The judges were unable to separate Kathrin Hottiger, the 26-year-old, Swiss soprano and Mariamelle Lamagat, the 26-year-old French soprano, so they decided to award both of them the third prize. Kathrin Hottiger sang Alcina’s aria, “Mi restano le lagrime,” from Handel’s opera of the same name. It was a plaintive rendition, capturing delightfully Alcina’s longing for oblivion, in which her pain was clearly expressed, as she span out long arching phrases, infused with subtle aching inflections. Her second aria, “False imagine,” was again delivered with a high degree of expressivity. Lamagat decided on “Scherzo in mar” from Handel’s “Lotario” and produced a very animated reading, both vocally and through her physical gestures. She also delivered a sensitive reading of “False imagine,” which highlighted the beautiful timbre of the voice, and her ability to craft delightful phrases.

The 24-year-old, French countertenor William Howard Shelton picked up the Nachwuchspreis, awarded to the young singer whom the judges decided would most benefit from financial support with their studies while pursuing their professional career. He sang “Generoso risvegliati” from Hasse’s “Cleofide” and “Torna sol per un momento” from Handel’s “Tolomeo.” To be fair to William Howard Shelton, he showed far better quality in the second aria than the first, but both displayed his careful attention to detail and the fine quality of his voice, which he used intelligently to characterise Tolomeo. He possesses a wonderfully expressive voice and was attentive to the words, and displayed an ability to form beautiful long lines, which he adorned with subtle embellishments. Moreover, he displayed a lot of potential.

The other finalists all performed well, and deserved credit for making this a closely contested competition. They included the 26-year-old Czech soprano, Marketa Bohmova; the 27-year-old tenor Remus Burens from Switzerland; the 27-year-old Polish countertenor, Rafal Tomkiewicz; Angelica Monje Torrez, a 31-year-old contralto from Bolivia; the soprano, Sofia Vinnik, from Germany, who at only 21 was the youngest of the finalists, and from Venezuela, the 24-year-old soprano, Samuel Marino, of whom a special mention should be given. He has the rare distinction of being a male soprano, and if it were not for a damaging error in his first aria,

“Leggi almeno, tiranna inference” from Vivaldi’s “Ottone in villa,” in which he had to stop and reorientate himself, could well have been in contention for a prize. His second aria, “L’aime a goder prepara” from Hasse’s aria “Siroe, re di Persia” was sung with power and versatility, but it was the tonal quality of the voice that really captured the attention; it was not just extraordinary, but also possessed incredible beauty.

Throughout the evening the contestants were accompanied by Barockenensemble:Jung under the direction of Fabrizio Ventura. They put in an excellent performance in their own right, and impressed beyond their unavoidable secondary role as an accompanying orchestra.