

# British Theatre Guide

News, reviews, features and podcast on theatre across the UK

## La clemenza di Tito

Music: Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart; Libretto: Caterino Mazzolà

Pacific Opera Victoria

Royal Theatre

16–22 October 2024

Some of the best memories I have of opera performance have taken place in the Royal Theatre of Victoria BC; the Pacific Opera Victoria has a special affinity for Mozart—there's something about Mozart that moves that company to great heights. The music fills the space with such grace and such delicacy.

This opera was premièred in the same theatre as *Don Giovanni* (the Estates Theater in Prague, *Giovanni* in 1787 and the present opera in 1791) but, perhaps more importantly, one then realises that 1791 was the year that both *Die Zauberflöte* and *La Clemenza* received their premières: *The Magic Flute* in Vienna and *Clemenza* in Prague. (It was quite a year for Mozart and also the last year of his life: Mozart died 5 December 1791.)

And I could hear the similarities between these last two operas: *Die Zauberflöte*, a popular Singspiel and the *Clemenza*, a opera seria, are formally very different kinds of works, but the fact that both these works came out in the same year leads to comparisons between the two. The Queen of the Night's arias, especially her "Der Hölle Rache", vocally at least seemed like an inversion of the role of Vitellia, one that seemed to descend into the lower register of Tracy Cantin's voice, just as the Queen goes up to a F6, which is two and a half octaves above middle C. (Both roles in fact are coloratura roles.) And both are operas in which grace triumphs, but Cantin's performance is thoughtful and emotionally true as Vitellia falls in and out of love and works with Sesto (another soprano role, sung here by Taylor Raven) to find at first revenge and later mercy.

The opera's machinations are complex as operas from this period often are, with many switches in the fates of the six principals, but it's driven by Vitellia's and Sesto's relationship and stands more as an exploration of what the nature of love and mercy and forgiveness are—Titus (the "Tito" of the title) was known by both classical and medieval sources as the epitome of mercy. The other three principals are responding to the central triangle (Sesto, Titus, and Vitellia) and are asking us as audience to respond to these questions: how much forgiveness and mercy is enough in matters not just of love but also of politics, and of friendship. In particular, Stephen Hegedus's Publio was the voice of the state versus the free will of the emperor. If Julia Dawson and Reilly Nelson ask about love, Publio is reminding Titus at every moment of his role as the emperor.

As a vocal performance, all six principals and the accompanying chorus were perfectly balanced, with the various trios—the libretto sets one against three constantly with the music given to one singer then alternating in a trio as the opera goes through its paces—in perfect balance with the Victoria Symphony as conducted by Guiseppe Pietaroia. An amazing evening, with heartbreaking music. Sometimes, in Mozart, the lower voices are figures of authority, even of doom (I'm thinking here of the Commendatore in *Giovanni*). Not here: Titus (beautifully sung by Andrew Haji) is not the kind of befuddled lover that Don Ottavio represents in *Giovanni*. No, this emperor has to balance

the needs of the state with his personal needs and with a fair resolution for all—and Haji lets us see the way in which his character works through and thinks through those issues.

So too with all the singers, again especially among the principals. We might not believe in what Ottavio has to say, but we listen here as the issues are bounced back and forth like some huge game. Another way of saying this is we're basically good to go as an audience with other Mozart operas—as long as the music keeps playing, we'll keep listening—but with this work, the *Tito*, these are real people facing real issues. There's a depth here that is sometimes missing in the Da Ponte operas. We want to know—no, we need to know what Titus is going to do, and we worry when Vitellia realises she's got it all wrong.

Wonderfully played, it is worth watching the emotions flow back and forth between the various characters as we find out more about the situation and what's at stake. Who loves who and at what moment is key to this work. And the figure of Titus himself seems to have engaged both the librettist (Caterino Mazzolà) as well as Mozart himself and brought this last opera of Mozart to its triumphal conclusion—there can't be too much forgiveness in the world. In other hands, “and everyone lived happily ever after” is too simple a solution. But here? It's the solution that clemency, mercy itself, made possible.

**Reviewer:** [Keith Dorwick](#)