

OPERA NEWS

INSIDER'S LOOK

*Massenet's Magic:
Cendrillon*

p. 32



2017 Awards

WILLIAM CHRISTIE // FIORENZA COSSOTTO //

VITTORIO GRIGOLO //

HEI-KYUNG HONG // SONYA YONCHEVA

▶ p. 18

April 2018

www.operanews.com

di Figaro. Although there is nothing remotely boyish about Cossotto's juicy timbre, it is salutary to hear Mozart's arias for the page sung with such sunny, crisp, Italian flavor.

Educated in Turin and Milan, Cossotto made her debut as Sister Mathilde in the 1957 world premiere of Poulenc's *Dialogues of the Carmelites* at La Scala and attracted early international attention as Giovanna Seymour at the 1958 Wexford Festival and as Neris in Cherubini's *Medea* at Covent Garden the following year. One night in January 1962, Cossotto was at home eating supper when she received a telephone call from La Scala informing her that the great mezzo Giulietta Simionato—one of La Scala's most important stars, and one of Cossotto's most admired colleagues—was ill and would be unable to sing Leonora in Donizetti's *Favorita*. With no time to be nervous, Cossotto took a taxi to the theater, sang

the performance and triumphed. From that evening on, Cossotto was a star; within a few seasons, her success took her to Vienna, Chicago, Barcelona, Paris and Venice. Her repertoire extended from Bellini's Adalgisa and Rossini's Rosina to Orfeo, Handel's Atalanta, Urbain in *Les Huguenots* and Carmen.

Cossotto's Met debut was one of the most anticipated events of the New York season; her first Met performance, as Amneris, on February 6, 1968, was a critical and popular knockout success, as was her Laura in *La Gioconda* a few weeks later. During her fifteen seasons on the Met roster, Cossotto gave 148 performances of ten roles with the company in New York and on tour in Japan and North America—and sang everything with unrelenting commitment and incomparable style. She was her own law, and she was glorious.


—F. PAUL DRISCOLL



Cossotto as Leonora di Gusman, one of her favorite roles, in Donizetti's *Favorita* at La Scala, 1974

ERIO PICCAGLIANI © TEATRO ALLA SCALA (FAVORITA); © OSCAR ORTEGA (CHRISTIE)

william CHERRIS conductor

A photograph of Maestro William Christie, an elderly man with white hair and glasses, wearing a black shirt. He is sitting at a harpsichord, resting his head on his hand. The background is dark and textured.

Maestro Christie, who gave Baroque music an authentically contemporary sound, at the harpsichord

WILLIAM CHRISTIE

has lit the way for opera's future by shining a brilliant light on its past. Period-instrument performances are, to some degree, efforts in historical reenactment. Yet one of the joys of experiencing a performance conducted by Christie is hearing music-making that seems to exist entirely in the present moment. The operas of Charpentier, Purcell, Handel and Rameau may be centuries old, but Christie and his superlative ensemble, Les Arts Florissants, perform these works with a polish and pulse that make them sound bracingly alive.

Christie's impeccable sensitivity to the shape of a phrase gives his work a timeless sheen that's unique in opera today: his baton incites prosody free from the influence of both over-stuffed postwar playing and stale Baroque orthodoxy. Witness Lorraine Hunt Lieberson's beatific performance of "As with rosy steps the morn," as conducted by Christie in a DVD documenting Glyndebourne's legendary staging of *Theodora*; the performance

is the sonic equivalent of staring deeply at a Byzantine image of the Virgin Mary and recognizing the face of one's own mother. Christie's gorgeous recording of violin sonatas with Hiro Kurosaki remains essential for musicians seeking to understand how to imbue a Handelian line with an emotional charge. On Les Arts Florissants's recording of *Die Zauberflöte*, the appoggiaturas leading into the high-lying phrases of Natalie Dessay's "Der Hölle Rache" bubble like giggles of evil laughter; it's a subtle detail that changes our conception of the aria and of the character who sings it. When it comes to historical performance practice, Christie's evil queen proves it's possible to have your cake and eat it, too.

Drawn into the cultural crucible of the Vietnam War, Christie moved to Paris in 1970, and it's telling that his earliest years abroad were spent performing contemporary repertoire along with the early music of Gesualdo and Monteverdi. His rediscovery of the forgotten sounds of the French Baroque and his founding of Les Arts Florissants in 1979 became acts of rebellion. "We were library rats researching this very underexplored field, and we clearly had nothing but disdain for an

awful lot of what was going on,” Christie told *The Guardian*.

Christie’s scorn for the status quo is likely the source of his understanding that very old music can help make sense of a chaotic modern existence. As preserved on DVD, his performance of Handel’s *Hercules*, featuring Joyce DiDonato’s Dejanira, is as psychologically riveting as any present-day wartime drama on Netflix. And the 2004 run of *Les Paladins* that Christie conducted at the Théâtre du Châtelet featured brilliant video projections and breakdancing as outrageously technicolored as Rameau’s score. As conducted by Christie, Jonathan Kent’s more recent production of *The Fairy Queen* emerged as one of the most riotously funny shows to play in an opera house in recent memory; it also

revealed Purcell to be one of the most cosmopolitan composers who ever lived.

If Christie’s reputation rested only on the music that has been played under his baton, his legacy would be secure. But in addition to founding Les Arts Florissants, he has established the ensemble’s academy for young singers, Le Jardin des Voix, and taught for more than a decade at the Paris Conservatoire; he serves as an artist in residence at Juilliard’s Historical Performance division, and his tireless work has spawned numerous successive generations of singers and conducting protégées. Through careful tending, Christie has made his garden grow. How fortunate that he has left the gate open to let us visit.

—ADAM WASSERMAN



© DENIS ROUVRE (CHRISTIE); © BEATRIZ SCHILLER (BOHÈME, RIGHT, AND TURANDOT ON FOLLOWING SPREAD)

