



Filling the Northern Lights with song: Soprano Julia Novikova performs in Tromsø

By Jaime Robles, 31 January 2014

Julia Novikova is indeed a lovely singer, in all ways. The young Russian soprano performed twice at the Northern Lights Festival in Tromsø, the capital of northern Norway, this past week, treating the attentive and devoted audiences to a diverse set of songs that stretched across a repertoire demanding different vocal styles and skills.



Julia Novikova with Martynas Stasuks and the Lithuanian Chamber Orchestra
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The first concert took place in the Arctic Cathedral, what is called a long church. With its A-shape and textured white walls, reminiscent of the irregularities of a field of snow, the cathedral has an unusual acoustic. Toward the altar side of the building the sound is full and resonant, blending but not obscuring the music. And opposite the altar, at the entrance of the building, where the ceiling rises to 35 meters in height, the sound has a distant but attractive quality. As one reviewer remarked, “it’s like a Snow Queen, beautiful and reserved” – an adept description of the church’s clear but seductive acoustic.

For this concert, Novikova was accompanied by the Lithuanian Chamber Orchestra, in an all Mozart concert. For her first songs she presented an unusual combination of arias: Susanna’s “Giunse alfin il momento” and Cherubino’s “Voi che sapete”. A lyric soprano with a preference for coloratura, Novikova has a warm sound with a bit of weight in the lower register and some strikingly gorgeous pianissimo notes in the higher notes, which tend to be lighter in presentation.

Reviewed at Arctic Cathedral / Tromsdalen Kirke, Tromsø on 28 January 2014

Programme

Mozart, *Le Nozze di Figaro*, K492: *Giunse al fin il momento*
 Mozart, *Le Nozze di Figaro* (*The Marriage of Figaro*), K492: *Voi che sapete*
 Mozart, *Don Giovanni*, K527: *Vedrai, carino*
 Mozart, *Don Giovanni*, K527: *Non mi dir*
 Mozart, *The Magic Flute* (*Die Zauberflöte*), K620: *Ach, ich Fühls*
 Mozart, *Die Entführung aus dem Serail*, K384: *Ach, ich liebte, war so glücklich*
 Mozart, *Serenade no. 13 in G major*, “*Eine kleine Nachtmusik*”, K525
 Mozart, *Symphony no. 41 in C major* “*Jupiter*”, K551
 Works by Debussy
 Works by Schumann
 Works by Strauss R.
 Works by Rachmaninov
 Gounod, *Romeo et Juliette: Je veux vivre* (*Juliet’s Waltz*)
 Handel, *Giulio Cesare in Egitto*, HWV 17: *Piangerò la sorte mia*

Performers

Julia Novikova, *Soprano*

Lithuanian Chamber Orchestra

Martynas Stasuks, *Conductor*

Sergej Osadchuk, *Piano*

Her choice of “Voi che sapete”, the mezzo aria from *Le nozze di Figaro* for a trouser role comic in its absurdity but poignant in its human insight, was characteristic of her choices throughout the concert – a wide range of emotions was portrayed, the charming melody of the song’s opening transforming into a more complex emotional interpretation.



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Novikova’s strengths lie in her tone, which is perfectly pitched and beautiful, and in her careful presentation of coloratura that is well suited to Mozart: its careful precision creates an aura of graciousness and charm. What was lacking perhaps, if a singer chooses to steer away from bravura and toward refinement, was Mozart’s playfulness and his sly irony.

The second set of arias was from *Don Giovanni* and again showed considered choice in its emotional presentation. The rustic maid Zerlina’s “Vedrai, carino”, a consoling and conciliatory aria was followed by Donna Anna’s “Non mi dir”, another song of reassurance but one laced with delicate pain and sorrow but that allows the singer a moment of hope and optimism in its ending runs, which are quicker and showier, spiked with dramatic dynamics. The recit parts of the aria were challenged by the orchestra, which tended to cover rather than support the singer.

The two other arias sung by Novikova were Pamina’s “Ach, ich fühl’s, es ist verschwunden” from *Die Zauberflöte* and the very-many-noted “Ach, ich liebte, war so glücklich” from *Die Entführung aus dem Serail*.

The Lithuanian Chamber Orchestra played *Eine kleine Nachtmusik* midway through the arias and ended the program with Mozart’s *Symphony no. 41, “Jupiter”*. A vivacious orchestra, directed by Martynas Stasukas, its members play with vigour and dedication. I prefer my Mozart with more delicacy, but the ensemble acquitted themselves nobly in the *Jupiter*.



Julia Novikova and Sergej Osadchuk in recital

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Novikova's second performance, titled "Songs to the Moon", was held in the recital hall of the Sparebank. Bravo, Norway! And thank you, gods, for giving us a culture that has elegantly accoutermented recital halls on the second floor of a bank! The building, designed in 1909 by architect Henrik Nissen, is in the Norwegian version of Art Nouveau, and its recital hall is touched with an airy form of Louis XIV style. With walls an adorable shade of green bordered in white with gold curlicues more substantial than Baroque filigree, the room has no corners – the walls simply round into the ceiling. I can't help thinking this is essential to the hall's acoustical clarity – the acoustics are subtler than those of the Arctic Cathedral, but no less beautiful.

For this piano-only accompanied recital, Novikova chose a selection of art songs, from Debussy to Schumann to Richard Strauss to Rachmaninov. My preference was for the Strauss. The Rachmaninov "Zdes' khorosho", a supremely touching song, requires high notes to come out of nowhere and Novikova nailed them with ease, though I would have liked to have had them float just a bit more.

The second half of the program favored pyrotechnic arias, beginning with "Je veux vivre" from Gounod's *Romeo and Juliette*. This was perfect for Novikova, allowing her to cut loose vocally and emotionally, providing the perfect match with her own youth and the character's exuberance. The aria was perfectly enhanced by Novikova black lace over dusky pink gown. Handel's "Piangero la sorte mia" from *Giulio Cesare* was a favorite, another song often sung by mezzos because of its lower tessitura. Cleopatra's Act III lament is not only melancholic in parts but demands forceful singing throughout the elaborate middle section. Novikova didn't decorate the aria but that was for the better, there is so much virtue in the composition to begin with.

Excellent instrumental support was provided by Sergej Osadchuk, a Ukrainian-born, Moscow-trained pianist who has taught at the North Norway Conservatory in Tromsø since 1992.

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