

An end to on-stage victimhood

SHIRLEY APTHORP

By **SHIRLEY APTHORP**

3:00PM NOVEMBER 29, 2019 •  2 COMMENTS

They are stabbed, suffocated, abandoned, or required to sacrifice themselves. All too often, the female protagonists of operas come to grisly ends for the delectation — or, equally disturbingly, for the edification — of their audiences.

Enter Farnace, Vivaldi's antihero. Defeated by the Romans, he abandons hope as the curtain goes up. Time for the women. Farnace's wife, sister and mother-in-law take matters into their own hands; the men spend the next three acts failing to catch up.

In programming Vivaldi's largely forgotten masterwork, Sydney's Pinchgut Opera could be launching the hashtag "notalloperas".

Which is just as well. Australian women have had enough of seeing their kind butchered on operatic stages. They made that clear in April this year, when Brisbane's New Opera Workshop issued a demand for a national commitment to systemic change — among other things, to the mindless reiteration of violence against women as a form of music theatre entertainment.

And it's true. Tosca, Carmen, Violetta, Isolde, Senta, Mimi, Gilda, Butterfly, Aida, Desdemona — all of these operatic heroines give their lives for, or are killed by, their men. That is not exactly the message arts organisations should be amplifying in a country where one in five women will experience sexual violence in their lifetime.

Of course, to assume that a synopsis must be read literally — as evidenced by the West Australian Opera Company's bemusing 2014 decision to drop Carmen because of the smoking scenes (note — not because the opera ends in femicide) — is to willingly ignore 70 years of stage direction history. Ever since Walter Felsenstein's work at Berlin's Komische Oper in the mid-

20th century and Ruth Berghaus's continuation of his ideas in 1970s Frankfurt, the world has accepted that opera need not be literal, and that subtext is not only possible, but often essential. Nobody expects Lohengrin to arrive on a swan in the 21st century. There is no reason why – as Barrie Kosky did in Essen in his 2006 *Flying Dutchman* – you cannot have Senta slit the Dutchman's throat, instead of killing herself.

Much of the problem, though, lies with the assumption that “opera” refers to the standard “top 20” operas that are the mainstay of major houses – big romantic repertoire from an era where, with the exception of comic operas, popular tragedy hinged upon the notion of the woman as victim.

While the New Opera Workshop quite rightly demanded a greater focus on the future – a future filled with female composers, librettists, stage and music directors, and not littered with female corpses – it is also worth looking to the past. Before Puccini, before Bizet, before Wagner and Verdi and Bellini, there was the gender-bending baroque, where you could never be quite sure whether the man on stage was a man, or a woman playing a man, or a woman playing a woman disguised as a man, or a castrato, or (in the case of Rome, where women were not permitted to perform) perhaps a man playing a woman disguised as a man. The possibilities were limitless.

The voyeuristic pathos of female victimhood did not play the same kind of role in baroque opera as it did in the romantic era because the function of music was fundamentally different. In baroque opera, drama served as a vehicle to move the action from one aria to the next, with each aria portraying an “affect”, or emotional state. Baroque music was conceived as a dialogue between performer and public, a conversation for connoisseurs in which all participants were masters of the language, in a meeting of intellectual equals. The audience as passive consumer of sentiment, as congregation worshipping at the altar of holy art, had not yet been conceived. Neither *Tosca* nor *Carmen* could have existed in a baroque opera. *Tristan and Isolde* would have sorted things out in time for a happy final ensemble.

So is *Farnace* a retrospective answer to #metoo? To cast Vivaldi as a feminist is a little like suggesting Handel was a surrealist; it makes no sense to interpret the 18th century through the lens of the 21st. To add to the confusion, we know too few hard facts about the Venetian composer's life.

Certainly the red-headed priest lived and worked in an unconventional environment. As

resident teacher and composer at the Ospedale della Pieta, Vivaldi had at his disposal the most talented young female musicians of his time.

Though primarily an orphanage, the Ospedale also functioned as an elite music school for young Venetian girls, who joined their abandoned female counterparts because the tuition was so outstanding. It was a kind of social utopia; those who could afford to pay fees, and for those who could not, there were scholarships. There was nothing like it anywhere else in the world; its lure as a tourist attraction brought additional income for the institution.

Within their cloistered lives, the “figlie di choro” formed instrumental and vocal ensembles, performed regularly, taught, and, presumably, also composed music. It is hard to imagine that Vivaldi can have spent almost three decades working there without being influenced by such a formidable female environment.

He was certainly close to the Mantua-born soprano Anna Giraud, for whom he wrote the role of Tamiri, Farnace’s wife. That was occasionally a problem. She was his star pupil; he wrote role after role for her, and brought her and her older sister to live in his home. It was not uncommon at the time for priests to have resident housekeepers, but the potential for gossip was sufficient to lead the Cardinal of Ferrara to cancel a planned run of Farnace in 1737, a decade after its successful premiere in Venice.

Vivaldi was vehement in his denials. He and Giraud, he insisted, were just good friends. He was a priest, and she and her sister were known for their devout characters.

We can never know the full story. What we can see is that while Vivaldi was proud, impulsive, vehement and determined, he was also brilliant, meticulous, sensitive and strategic. Vivaldi was a man who could recognise and nurture female intelligence and strength, who could write it into his music and centre it on his stages.

In bringing Farnace to Angel Place, Pinchgut continues to demonstrate that many of the voices we most need to hear in the operatic canon are to be found beyond the mainstream. Farnace’s premiere takes place just days before Olga Neuwirth’s Orlando receives its world premiere at the Vienna State Opera – with a libretto written together with Catherine Filloux, based on Virginia Woolf’s novel, directed by Polly Graham. Three weeks earlier, Chaya Czernowin’s Heart Chamber opens at Berlin’s Deutsche Oper. Names like Kaija Saariaho, Liza

Lim, Missy Mazzoli, and Elena Kats-Chernin have long since joined those of their male peers on contemporary operatic schedules. We may still be a long way from the female dominance represented in Vivaldi's opera, but we are moving away from the era of woman-as-doormat.

Farnace's women just remind us not to give up.

Farnace shows at City Recital Hall, Sydney, from December 4 to 10.