

THE
VEREMONDA
RESURRECTION

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Bringing a seventeenth-century Venetian opera back to life

TEXT ALLISON ZURFLUH
PHOTOGRAPHS MICHEL JUVET

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Preface

By ALLISON ZURFLUH

When we first started discussing our plans for *The Veremonda Resurrection*, a quest took shape. How does an ancient manuscript that has kept quiet on the dusty shelves of a Venetian library for centuries suddenly become a colorful, effervescent stage production? Accoutered with camera equipment, and armed with pen and ink, Michel Juvet and I decided to find out.

I'd come to know Michel better the weekend he joined me in Torino for a photo shoot that would accompany an article I was writing for a Swiss magazine on this new production of a seventeenth-century opera, *Veremonda, l'Amazzone di Aragona*. A Swiss photographer from Geneva, his off-center visual observations went well with my own patchwork life. Born to a Swiss father in Los Angeles, I'd been living in Switzerland for twenty some years and had an appetite for beauty that wouldn't be satiated. Spending an afternoon in Torino with four brilliant artists had been exhilarating; and not long after we set out to expand the original article into a book, which is where this journey began.

We jotted down the things we would need to see and photograph as we travelled from Venice to Torino, passing through Rome and on to the vibrant southern town of Charleston; and as we finalized the itinerary in Venice, the photographer had only one unwavering condition: no gondolas.

The flat-bottomed rowing boats are iconic to the opera's native city, and add an archetypal vibe. Do you go to Paris without seeing the green *bouquinistes* along the shimmering Seine?

6 This is the hour
that my secret lover
prepares to meet me...
true and constant he comes to make love...
to this place
where the setting sun in these Iberian
waters beholds our fiery passion.
ZELEMINA

A gondola seemed the most natural thing to have floating in the soft-colored lagoon of *La Serenissima*.

We had finished dinner one night during the shoot and were walking toward the hotel in the sestiere (district) of Castello, bordering the Arsenale naval district to the east and San Marco to the west. I was leading the way through skinny streets in my usual expeditious gait and Michel was asking me to slow it down since it's hard to take good pictures at a break-neck speed. I asked him about the boats.

"Well," he considered, "it's like the title for the book. I'd suggest something along the lines of *Veremonda Strikes Back*," he huffed behind me. I slowed my pace. "Visual clichés are to the photographer what Hollywood allusions are to the writer," he continued. The guy can make a point.

"No gondolas it is."

Michel was not on his way back to the hotel. Instead, we parted at the bridge and he walked on to spend a good part of the night at Piazza San Marco taking pictures - just the right ones with no people, and no clutter. One of the more challenging things about the Piazza these days is the number of hawkers selling neon blue light-up toys that shoot into the sky at a couple euro a piece. They're a plague to photographers. Unable to get a decent night shot before midnight, Michel camped out until the very last group of teenagers had taken a final selfie in front of the basilica and all the hawkers had moved on.

The plastic toys are but a reminder of a greater and equally synthetic ill that has afflicted the city over time: a painful string of poorly interpreted Baroque *greatest hits* designed to attract tourists, but which turn the genre into a dollar flick. Piazza San Marco is loaded with them, and they are often played opposite a pop band or chart-topping tune more akin to a blockbuster soundtrack than a seventeenth to mid-eighteenth century masterpiece.

Not unlike Michel's night watch for the unadulterated shot, music professionals in Venice are promoting what in the world of classical music is considered a niche art form. They labor to reclaim an authenticity that has been lost by building an enduring framework for the historical context of the Venetian Baroque genre. Dexterous composers such as Monteverdi, Cavalli, Lotti, and Vivaldi hall-marked a golden era that produced copious amounts of cantatas, oratorios, and



opera. These are passionate, suffused with intensity and emotion. A thin slice of the music community looks on while maestri create a cult of historically accurate performances played on echt Baroque instruments, among which the new staging of *Veremonda*.

Our quest becomes clear in this context. Why is this particular opera so important that we would travel hither and yon to do a book about it? Because the first time I sat in Piazza San Marco years ago with a volume about the dawn of Venetian Baroque music in my hands, the Pointer Sisters blaring on one side of the Piazza and a couple of eighteenth century be-costumed fiddlers jamming down a milk toast version of *The Four Seasons* on the other, the fingernails scratching

down the chalkboard of my soul were too loud to ignore. Because the authentic beauty being revived by a devoted group of professionals is exciting. Because what they were showing me behind locked doors of various churches and palazzi was nothing like what was being sold in the streets. Venetian Baroque music is so much more than a tourist attraction, Venice so much greater than a cruise stop.

In one way this project has fed my status as a groupie. I have been bewitched by opera since the night I heard Cecilia Bartoli sing in Salzburg. Three hours passed in a matter of minutes, and when it was over all I wanted was more. More thrill, more emotion, more tears, more of that sound. I wanted to keep looking into the brutally honest mirror, and feeling okay about what I saw. Because if opera does anything, it represents the human plight. It shines light on what is inside us much like theater does, but is set to music designed by skilled composers and interpreted by shrewd conductors and stage directors to make tangible our most raw and intense emotions. That moment in Salzburg reinforced a thought I'd had for decades: that the reason we write is to speak music.

When Aaron Carpenè first invited me into his world of opera, it sealed my relationship with the genre for good. Sitting demurely in his conductor's chair Aaron used words like *erotic* to amp up my own *delicious*. And then I met Stefano Vizioli, who while describing the beauty of the stage, expounded on the benefits of food for the soul as he slapped an enormous slice of Gorgonzola on my plate after a lunch of *pasta all'ortolana*. I knew then that something bigger was coming between us. And it has.

This journey, which I'm not yet ready to end, is in fact my own beginning. It has been an awakening, an entry into awareness, a personal birth of sorts, not so unlike the conjuring of *Veremonda* from her dusty shelf. The quest, I can tell you, has been far more exciting than I ever thought it would be.

This book seeks to offer a journalist's discovery set to a photographer's off-center art. It is about how music professionals study a simple manuscript heretofore hidden away in a seaside library, carry it around inside them for many months, prepare the nursery, and give birth to a strapping new life, all in the name of reviving the authenticity of a genre and making music of incalculable worth available to a contemporary public.

Veremonda, l'Amazzone di Aragona is a very clear example of this. They awaken her, and the din and pother of the *over- and poorly-used* begins to wane. With her coming, a part of *La Serenissima* is set free.

It is our hope that as you journey with us, something inside you will feel unleashed in much the same way, and that you would experience a portion of the fiery passion that is opera.

Venice, January 2016