

# Voce di meche

*We are here to encourage the development of gifted young singers and to stimulate the growth of New York City's invaluable chamber opera companies. But we will not neglect the Metropolitan Opera either. Get ready for bouquets and brickbats.*

Friday, March 18, 2016

## SECRET LOVE Jennifer Moore



Jennifer Moore and Everett Suttle (photo by Tina Buckman)

Love is a carelessly handled state in 21st c. America; people jump in and out of relationships like rabbits. But in 18th c. France, love was a serious issue and many rules of etiquette had to be observed. It was not unusual for folks to pine away for a love object and many *chansons* were written about unfulfilled longing and desire.

This situation was delicately handled by the prodigious composer Joseph Bologne, Chevalier de Saint-Georges, in his 1780 opera *L'amant Anonyme* which was given a charming production by The Little Opera Theatre of NY, affectionately known as LOTNY--a company which has introduced us to several other rarities.

The composer was born in Guadeloupe to a slave woman named Nanon and fathered by a French plantation owner who brought his family to France when Joseph was but 7 years old, ensuring that his son received a fine education. Young Joseph exhibited early aptitude for music, dancing, and fencing; his charm, talents, and good looks won him a place in society although at certain times his being a mulatto brought ugly prejudice into his life. From what we gleaned from our reading, his life story would have made a splendid

opera in and of itself.

This brief opera, his only surviving one, was premiered at a private theater for the entertainment of aristocrats and it is likely that the composer himself bore within a secret love for a Caucasian woman. Perhaps he was working through his predicament by means of his art.

LOTNY Founder and Artistic Director Philip Shneidman wisely combined episodes from the composer's life to pad out the slender story which, for today's audience, needed a bit of conflict. Dialogue was recited in English with the gorgeous arias, duets, and ensembles sung in mostly excellent French.

Valcour (tenor Everett Suttle) is in love with Léontine (soprano Jennifer Moore) but is afraid to tell her since she seems to have sworn off love. Valcour gets encouragement from his friend Ophémon (baritone Jesse Malgieri) and Léontine gets the same from her Lady in Waiting Dorothee (mezzo-soprano Aude Cardona). There is another couple whose betrothal serves as inspiration to the reluctant couple-- Jeannette (soprano Marie Masters) who is engaged to Colin (tenor Anthony Webb).

We have previously heard and enjoyed in various venues the excellent singers in this cast but, rest assured, we are also well acquainted with the singers of the other cast whom you can count on to deliver performances just as fine as this cast. We might add, since we are not color blind, that casting African-Americans as the composer/Valcour was completely appropriate, lending verisimilitude to the story.

Mozart may have dominated the music scene in Austria but we are less well acquainted with French musicians of the Classical Period in France. It was a fine thing to become acquainted with the lovely music of the Chevalier de Saint-Georges; there is a delicacy to the music that tickles the ear and the melodies are eminently singable.

The eight musicians of New Vintage Baroque included Elliot Figg who conducted from the harpsichord. Instruments were authentic to the period. We are not sure we could tell the difference in the case of the violins, viola, and cello; but there was no mistaking the pair of baroque oboes and the impressive baroque bassoon. The sound was enthralling.

We can only hope that some of these arias and duets will find their way onto the concert stage. Perhaps the singers will take note of this suggestion and perform them at recital. The harmonies of the duets were particularly lovely and songs about reluctance in love and about romantic longing are often heard at recital.

We feel grateful to LOTNY for bringing this previously unheard composer to our attention. One never knows what one is missing until one hears it!

(c) meche kroop