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# In Rome, a Melodic Nero Burns With Love

By **JAMES R. OESTREICH**

It did not take long for the medium of opera, as it coalesced in Italy in the first half of the 17th century, to discover the heady combination of glorious music put to the service of venality and vice. Monteverdi, a founding father, certainly had it down by the time of his final opera, “L’Incoronazione di Poppea,” which appeared in Venice in 1643.

Framed as a contest among gods (Fortune, Virtue and Love), “L’Incoronazione” — presented by the [Dell’Arte Opera Ensemble](#) in the East 13th Street Theater on Thursday evening — is set at the imperial court of Nero (Nerone) in Rome.

Ottone, a nobleman, discovers that his lover, Poppea, has taken up with Nerone, partly, at least, as a bid to become empress. The philosopher Seneca objects to Nerone’s plan to divorce the current empress, Ottavia, and is rewarded with execution. Ottavia, meanwhile, has ordered Ottone to kill Poppea. Ottone, disguised as a woman (in the clothes of his new lover, Drusilla), tries to do so but is foiled by Amore, the young god of love. Ottone and Ottavia are exiled.

But all ends well for Nerone and Poppea, who marry and crown their love with one of the most beautiful duets in all of opera, “[Pur ti miro](#)”: utterly simple musically yet deeply complex in the way it encapsulates a perhaps unseemly love of self as well as an ecstatic love for another. (Or is it the benefices available through another?) This amazing music is appended to the end of the work, and, more amazing still, Monteverdi may not have been the one who wrote it. Other candidates are his contemporaries Benedetto Ferrari, who wrote the text, and Francesco Saccati.

Dell’Arte serves as a training ground for rising young singers, and the vocal performances here spoke well for its efforts. [Greer Davis](#), a soprano, was wonderful as Poppea, clear-voiced and self-possessed; [Alison Taylor Cheeseman](#), a mezzo-soprano, was also lovely and sturdy as Nerone. Their blend was excellent in “Pur ti miro.”

Other fine performances came from Jeffrey Mandelbaum, a countertenor, as Ottone; Katherine Howell, a soprano, as Ottavia; and Rachel Barker, a soprano, as Drusilla. The musical quality was further enhanced by the presence of [the Sebastian Chamber Players](#), a leading young early-music ensemble, which performed beautifully throughout.

Given Dell'Arte's emphasis on the voice, its productions tend to be bare-bones, as Victoria Crutchfield's was here: a few props, a few costumes, all with an easygoing mix of ancient Rome and contemporary America. Ms. Crutchfield was sometimes able to limn a character at a single stroke, as with Fortune (Adrienne Pardee), energetically chewing and loudly snapping gum at her entrance, her arrogance and combativeness established even before she opened her mouth (and took out the gum) to sing.

Ms. Crutchfield's only significant miscalculation was to put distracting stage business immediately behind the singers in the first section of "Pur ti miro," which, however, ended hauntingly.

*The Dell'Arte Opera Ensemble's "Incoronazione di Poppea" runs through Sunday (with a different cast on Tuesday) at the East 13th Street Theater, 136 East 13th Street, Manhattan; (646) 796-3492, [dellarteopera.org](http://dellarteopera.org).*



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