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## Concert review: Italian opera sparkles in ancient Chinese setting



This 1812 single-act opera was once very popular but later neglected because of its origins as a farsa (farce). PHOTO: HAWK LIU

[Chang Tou Liang](#)

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### Rossini's *L'Inganno Felice*

#### **Lirica Arts**

**Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts, Saturday (March 5)**

It is a little-known fact that until recently, only one of Gioachino Rossini's 39 operas, *The Barber Of Seville*, had been performed in Singapore.

That all changed when the great Italian composer's L'Inganno Felice (The Blissful Deception) got its Singapore premiere, a debut outing for newly formed opera company Lirica Arts.

This 1812 single-act opera was once very popular but later neglected because of its origins as a farsa (farce), a semi-serious piece that fell between the cracks of comic opera and grand opera.

Running at around 80 minutes and involving a small cast of five singers, it was not taken seriously by major opera companies. It is, however, well-suited as a pandemic opera with transmission risks minimised by the chamber forces employed.

Its plot is relatively simple and almost farcical. Isabella (soprano Joyce Lee Tung) is an abandoned wife wrongly accused of infidelity, framed by the villainous Ormondo (baritone William Lim) whose advances she earlier spurned.

Her husband, Duke Bertrando (tenor Jonathan Charles Tay), thinks she is dead, but the lady, having been rescued by Tarabotto (baritone David Tao), assumes the role of Tarabotto's niece. The opera's action kicks off when Isabella and Bertrando get reunited by chance.

The 20-year-old Rossini's music provided an early example of the bel canto style, characterised by sumptuous melodic lines dressed with florid ornamentations.

In that respect, Lee was an ideal exponent. Her vocal capabilities, established from the opening aria on her lamentable fate, was matched by more than credible acting.

Her highly sympathetic role also stood shoulder to shoulder with four male characters. Tay's bright and wide-eyed demeanour contrasted well with Tao's more buffo (comedic) character, both a foil for stage veteran Lim's menacing malevolence and reluctant henchman Batone (baritone Martin Ng). There were simply no weak links among the five singers.

Director Tang Xinxin moved the setting of the opera from Italy to ancient China, with Dorothy Png's simple yet effective set and lighting design evoking a garden villa in Suzhou.

There was a brief scene in which the shadows of the reunited lovers were projected, making for a classically Chinese picture-perfect silhouette.

Isabella was the only character donning full Chinese opera make-up, contrasted with the men's partial face paint, indicating her to be the most fleshed-out character of all. The silk brocades also made a stunning impact.

Accompanying music was provided by the Wayfarer Sinfonietta conducted by Lien Boon Hua, opening with a typically witty overture and sensitively partnering the singers throughout.

Despite some foursquare musical sequences, the generally upbeat tone of the proceedings was a hit with the audience, which packed a full house that no longer needed to be socially distanced.

Lirica Arts' maiden production proved to be a roaring success.

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