

Berlioz

BÉATRICE BÉNÉDICT



OPERA BOSTON

Julie Boulianne and Sean Panikkar engage in “A kind of merry war”

in Opera Boston’s
Béatrice et Bénédict

Julie Boulianne and Sean Panikkar are making their Opera Boston debuts in the title roles of Berlioz’s *Béatrice et Bénédict*, but this new production is not the first time they have worked together.

Earlier this season, Boulianne and Panikkar sang in seven performances of Gounod’s *Roméo et Juliette* at the Metropolitan Opera in the supporting roles of Stéphano and Tybalt respectively. They didn’t have a scene together, but both singers are amused that they participated in the same fighting and fencing class.

This experience is standing them in good stead these days, although all the fencing and fighting in *Béatrice et Bénédict* is verbal. The two leading characters wage a merry war of wits throughout – a war that is their way of disguising their true feelings about each other from each other, and indeed from themselves.

Boulianne and Panikkar, Panikkar still in his late 20s, Boulianne in her very early 30s, both with rapidly ascendant careers, recently

sat down in the coffee room down the hall from Opera Boston’s rehearsal area in the Calderwood Pavilion to talk about Berlioz’s opera, their roles, their lives, and each other.

Boulianne, a French-Canadian mezzo from Montreal, is petite and vivacious, and she enlivens her conversation with droll bits of self-mockery; even when she is dressed in casual rehearsal clothes she radiates star quality. She has won particular success in Rossini’s roles for coloratura mezzo in *Le Comte Ory* and *Il barbiere di Siviglia* and the title role in

Cenerentola. Panikkar is also charismatic – tall, thin, handsome, but also both serious and practical. Born in Bloomsburg, Pennsylvania, he’s an American whose parents are Sri Lankans who emigrated to this country back in 1975. Panikkar’s signature role to date is Tamino in Mozart’s *Die Zauberflöte*, although he is about to appear in his second production of Bizet’s *Les pêcheurs de Perles*, an opera set in Sri Lanka, Panikkar’s ancestral homeland which he has never seen.

*Opera Boston’s production of Berlioz’s
Béatrice et Bénédict opens in the
Cutler Majestic Theater Friday Oct. 21
at 7:30 PM with repeat performances
on Sunday Oct. 23 at 3, and Tuesday
Oct. 25, again at 7:30 PM.*

Neither singer has appeared in *Béatrice et Bénédict* before – the opera is not often staged – and both have found their roles challenging to learn and rehearse, but also fun and rewarding.

Both of them say that the music sounds a lot easier to sing than it actually is. “The vocal line,” Boulianne says, “is always going to a place you don’t expect it to go.” Panikkar adds, “And the rhythm is just as tricky. In the last duet, for example, each of us is singing the same thing, but in a different rhythm.” “I have to keep counting the beats all the time,” Boulianne sighs, “and keep smiling. The audience must never notice what I am *really* doing.” And Panikkar points out that the music is full of repeated phrases “that are the same but not the same, so you have to pay attention all the time.”

Béatrice’s aria in the second act is one of the highlights of the score; it is a dramatic monologue from which Béatrice emerges a changed person. “You have to be so emotionally involved to sing this aria,” Boulianne says. “But there is no place where you can relax and just let it go because the music is so tricky.”

Another interesting aspect of the music, the singers find, is how Berlioz treats the different sexes. The men’s music is all lively and witty; Berlioz gives all the moments of repose and reflection to the women – the magical duet that closes the first act and a trio for the women in the second.

The opera is Berlioz’s adaptation of one plot-line in Shakespeare’s *Much Ado About Nothing*, and there is a fair amount of spoken dialogue. Berlioz prepared the libretto himself, working from a translation of Shakespeare’s play into French; some of the dialogue comes directly from the translation, some of it is by Berlioz himself. For this production, Opera Boston has decided to keep the singing in the original French, while the dialogue will be in English. Stage director David Kneuss has made a new English version of the dialogue, including as much of Shakespeare’s original text as possible.

Both singers are experienced in spoken dialogue, but both are also wary of it. “I love concert performances in which a narrator replaces the dialogue,” Panikkar admits. “I’ve done Tamino that way in the Hollywood Bowl, and Alfred Molina was there to substitute for my dialogue, and that was awesome. I was also in a concert performance of Ricky Ian Gordon’s operatic version of *The Grapes of*

Wrath, and Jane Fonda was the narrator. What I can say is that I have learned something useful from every experience I have had with spoken dialogue.”

This wariness is partly the result of the fact that the technical demands of projecting dialogue and singing are not the same. Boulianne says she is relieved to be performing a female part in this opera because she can at least use her natural speaking voice. When she appeared in Chabrier’s *L’Etoile*, she took a travesty role, playing a male character, and had to lower her speaking voice for the dialogue and found that made the singing more difficult.

Boulianne’s speaking voice is in the correct register for Béatrice, but French is her native language, so she has been working very hard, she says, on making every word intelligible. “I watched Emma Thompson in the Kenneth Branagh movie of the Shakespeare play and she was fantastic. But there is no way I could do what she did; I have to keep the part close to what I am – in the end, I have to make it my own; there is no other option. In Quebec, I was brought up on Molière, not Shakespeare. This is a French opera, however, and I find all the arguing, all the playing with words, the constant sense of irony, very French.”

Both singers credit Kneuss for his help with the dialogue – some rehearsals were devoted exclusively to dialogue. “David’s early training was as an actor, so he has shown us how many different ways to change or enlarge meaning through the ways we inflect the words,” Panikkar says, and Boulianne adds, “We have decided to *use* my accent as part of the drama; we play with it.”

Another dimension of spoken dialogue the cast has worked on extensively is how to bridge the different tempos of singing and speech and keep the energy and momentum rolling forward. “Berlioz’s transitions are not always smooth,” Panikkar says, “so we are still experimenting with speaking some of the dialogue over the introductory music of the next number.”

Shakespeare sets the action in the 15th century, in Messina, in Sicily, during the period of the wars with the Moors. But most productions change the period – a famous New York Shakespeare Festival version, preserved on DVD, for example, sets the play in America as the 19th-century turned into the 20th, the time of suffragettes and Teddy Roosevelt’s Rough

Riders and the Keystone Cops. The Branagh film is set in 19th-century Tuscany.

Kneuss's decision is to set the opera in Italy of the 1950s – perhaps not the “real” Italy of the 1950s or early 1960s, but the Italy of the famous comedies directed by Vittorio di Sica like *Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow* and *Marriage, Italian Style*. This allows for picturesque scenery and costumes by Robert Perdziola, who designed Opera Boston's acclaimed production of Offenbach's *La Grande-Duchesse de Gérolstein* two seasons ago.

Boulianne and Panikkar have both appeared in traditional and updated productions – Panikkar was in Peter Sellars's controversial staging and DVD of Mozart's *Zaide*, which the director set in a contemporary sweatshop. Both singers agree that the debate between traditional stagings and *regie* updating is almost irrelevant, because effective and meaningful work has been done in both styles, just as atrocities have been perpetrated in both styles. Both are delighted with Kneuss's concept for *Béatrice et Bénédicte*. “This story is not time-bound,” Boulianne says. “It permeates every period.”

Both singers arrived at the Metropolitan Opera very young, and both bypassed the Met's own Lindemann Young Artists Development Program.

Panikkar started singing in high school choruses and began voice lessons as part of a push to get his chorus into the competitive state finals. He went to the University of Michigan intending to study engineering, but his teacher urged him to send a tape to the music department too, so he did. He was accepted and spent a short time with a double

major – his parents insisted on engineering as a fallback position, although Panikkar has told interviewers that he had no interest in falling back on something he didn't want to do at all. When a teacher played him a recording of Jon Vickers, Panikkar understood what he wanted to become. “I had never heard singing that was so *real*,” he exclaims.

While still a student at Michigan, Panikkar appeared in his first record – the award-winning Naxos recording of William Bolcom's *Songs of Innocence and Experience*. After graduation, he was accepted into the San Francisco Opera's Merola program for young artists. Through that program he sang the small but significant role of Edmondo in Puccini's *Manon Lescaut* with the main company. Karita Mattila was singing the title role, which she was scheduled to perform later on at the Met. A Met honcho went to see her performance

and liked the Edmondo, so Panikkar was asked to audition. In 2008 Edmondo was his Met debut, James Levine, conducting, and less than three weeks later he appeared on the HD telecast that was seen around the world.

With his manager, Panikkar set up a plan that he is still carefully following – he sings a restricted number of performances of leading lyric roles that suit his youthful voice and supplements them with performances of important secondary roles like Cassio in Verdi's *Otello* or Brighella in Strauss's *Ariadne auf Naxos*. He can leave a positive impression in such parts without endangering his voice.

“I don't want to name any names,” Panikkar says,” but I have many friends who have let themselves be talked into singing big roles in big opera houses, but they are petrified at what



Julie Boulianne and Sean Panikkar in rehearsal for *Béatrice et Bénédicte*.
Photo © Kathy Wittman - Ball Square Films

they may be doing to their voices. I have been offered a lot of inappropriate things myself, but I do not want to do that now, or ever. I am one of the lucky ones – I can make a living by singing and I want to sing for a long time. If my voice grows and I can sing heavier roles in the future, I will, but if not, I will keep on singing lyric roles. I have to do what is in the best interests of my voice.”

Panikkar also has a family to think of. In the year of his Met debut, he also sang his first leading role, Alfredo in *La Traviata* with Arizona Opera – and he and his wife had their first baby, a daughter, who has recently been joined by a little brother. This is one reason why Panikkar still makes his home in Ann Arbor, Michigan – he and his wife have many relatives there who provide support services when he is on the road, singing. And, he adds, with a twinkle in his eye, he is a diehard fan of all the Michigan athletic teams, and he has received the distressing word that he is required at rehearsal during the annual football game between Michigan and its rival Michigan State this season.

Boulianne studied at McGill University, where her predecessors as undergraduate singers included Karina Gauvin, Dominique Labelle, and Joseph Kaiser. After graduation, she went into the Montreal Opera’s apprentice program, and then went on to the Julliard School, where she won ovations for her performance of Isolier in Rossini’s *Le Comte Ory*. That led to a successful onstage audition at the Met, which engaged her to sing Diane in Gluck’s *Iphigénie en Tauride*, and Stéphanie in *Roméo et Juliette* and to cover Joyce DiDonato in *Le Comte Ory* earlier this year. In addition her repertory in the United States, France, and Canada has grown to include roles in Mozart’s *Don Giovanni* and *Le Nozze di Figaro*, Handel’s *Tolomeo*, and Massenet’s *Cendrillon*. Her first recording, for Naxos – Ravel’s *L’Enfant et les Sortilèges* and *Shéhérazade* with the Nashville Symphony – was nominated for a Grammy.

Like Panikkar, Boulianne found herself performing her debut role in an HD telecast. “It was terrifying,” Boulianne admits. “I hate cameras. It was scary enough singing with Plácido Domingo’s head right in front of me!”

The Met makes a “scratch tape” of each opera during a previous performance so they will have something to cover any emergency. Boulianne refused to look at the scratch tape –

“If I had watched it, I would have cancelled,” she says. Panikkar, on the other hand, was eager to see and study himself. “We are always shocked the first time we hear an audio tape of ourselves singing; a singer never knows what he sounds like to someone else. But we get used to it – we tape our lessons all the time. I felt I needed to watch the tape – all I could think about was how terrible I looked, and how I needed to change this gesture or that one. It is a tremendous leap between singing for 4000 people and it’s over and it’s done and singing for millions who are not right there in front of you, and what you do is being preserved with all its flaws. The way the cameras are always moving is very disturbing.”

Of course both singers realize how fortunate they have been to appear in Met HD transmissions. Panikkar does observe, however, that there is a problem. “There are many wonderful singers today who are not getting the work they deserve because of how they look physically, and the public is missing out on some incredible singing. And sometimes people who are getting a lot of work because of how they look do not sing as well as some of those who aren’t performing as often.”

Looking ahead, Panikkar says his next engagements for this season are for *Les Pêcheurs de Perles*, *Salome*, and *Nabucco*. Boulianne is awaiting the imminent release of another CD, Mahler’s *Kindertotenlieder* and *Lieder des fahrenden Gesellen*, in the arrangements Arnold Schoenberg made for singer and chamber ensemble; she filled out the recording with some little-known songs by Alma Mahler. For the rest of this season she is concentrating on concert and recital projects and engagements. “I need a break from opera,” she says. “For the last two or three years I have been running from one new role to another, sometimes juggling two new roles at the same time. So I am looking forward to the chance to concentrate on one thing at a time for awhile. It is important to go one day at a time; everything I do helps me to know more about myself and my possibilities.”

As the rehearsal hour arrives, Boulianne and Panikkar return to their meeting in a fencing class. “Now it is a war of words,” Panikkar says. And with a lilting laugh Boulianne adds, “Now we fight for love . . .”

- Richard Dyer