

THE AUSTRALIAN

Don Procopio: Lost and Found's Bizet in a suburban hall? Bingo

PAUL HOPWOOD THE AUSTRALIAN 12:00AM JUNE 16, 2016



Scene from *Don Procopio*. Picture: Grant Taylor

The self-avowed mission of Lost and Found Opera is to present little-known operas in non-traditional spaces carefully chosen to suit the repertoire.

On Tuesday night the company gave the Australian premiere of Georges Bizet's wedding farce *Don Procopio*, written while the young composer was living in Rome in 1858.

The "found" space — the Vasto Club in Perth — is a suburban Italian community hall, surrounded by a recycling centre, BMX track and soccer fields, and frequently used for bingo and for weddings.

Inside the hall is dressed for a wedding reception, complete with red velvet drapes, disco balls and a three-sided banqueting table at which patrons may, if they wish, enjoy dinner served before, during and after the performance.

The fourth side is the raised stage, a space for a chamber ensemble — four strings, two winds and accordion — and a chorus of knitting nonnas,

including some residents from the local retirement village. The action takes place under the noses of the audience, in the relatively unadorned space between the banquet tables.

Inevitably the question is whether the opera really works, stripped of all the advantages of the opera house itself, its pit and orchestra, the glamour and prestige of its architecture and, not least, its acoustics. The answer in this case is, emphatically, yes.

Credit must go to director and translator Thomas de Mallet Burgess, whose script and direction is consistently funny and contemporary.

Similar credit is due to Chris van Tuinen, who rearranged Bizet's full orchestral score for drastically reduced forces and who maintained a tight ensemble with the singers even though, for the entire night, his back was to them.

The soloists were each quite remarkable. It was astounding to see them perform with such comic timing, verve and swagger in what, I imagine, must be quite a confronting proximity with the audience, and to hear them sing with such commitment and skill in so bare an acoustic and with such meagre orchestral support.

Tenor Alasdair Kent's lyrical solo at the beginning of the second act was a moment of extraordinary beauty laced with delicious irony: an open-hearted love song from 1858 played with the fake sincerity of a reality-TV talent show.

Michael Lewis's portrayal of the crotchety Don Procopio was particularly fine, and his grand exit, at high speed on a mobility scooter, arm raised in a vulgar salute, was genuinely hilarious.

Unknown opera in a bingo hall? Don't miss it.

Don Procopio. Lost and Found Opera. The Vasto Club, Balcatta, Perth, June 14.

Tickets: \$50. Duration: 2hr plus interval. Until Saturday.