

Central Park & “La cantantessa”. Consoli’s music in NYC

George De Stefano (October 02, 2007)



Carmen Consoli, Italy’s leading female singer-songwriter, returned to New York to give a concert at the Delacorte Theater in Central Park, an amphitheater famous for its Shakespeare productions. On a pleasantly warm, late summer evening, under a clear sky, Consoli entertained an audience of Italian expatriates and American fans with material from her most recent album, *Eva Contro Eva*, as well as



some radically revised versions of older songs. The Central Park show was the best of the three appearances “la cantantessa” from Catania has made in New York in as many years.

She sang powerfully and well; her voice, a distinctive contralto-mezzo soprano, filled the theater, and her adept band never sounded better. Besides being a beautiful setting, the outdoor venue gave Consoli the freedom to rock harder than she has in the confines of Joe’s Pub, the intimate downtown club she played during her previous New York stopovers.

Consoli opened with “Sulle Rive di Morfeo” (On Morpheus’ Riverbanks), a track from *Eva Contro Eva* that offers some of her finest lyric writing, with haunting poetic images of lovers strolling where “nitide acque” (murky waters) “divorono” (devour) their footsteps. Performing it solo, accompanying herself on acoustic guitar, she gave a more intense reading than the album’s dreamy version, with dramatic pauses and hard guitar strums on the downbeat.

Her take on “Morfeo” would set the pattern for her interpretations of the *Eva* material. The low-key and subtle arrangements work well on the album. But at the Delacorte, Consoli wisely pumped up the intensity, quickening the tempos, accentuating the rhythms, and, with her band, adding new colors and textures. “Pendio d’Abbandono” (The Slope of Abandon) sounded fuller and more Arabic than when she performed it last year at Joe’s Pub, with flute and violin evoking the swooping strings of an Egyptian orchestra.

Several of *Eva*’s tracks are story-songs that offer sharp observations of Sicilian society. “Maria Catena” (Mary Chain) is a vignette of sexism and religious intolerance, as the title character suffers the rumor-mongering of the good Catholics of her small-town parish church. The priest, swayed by the talebearers, denies her the Eucharist. Christ on the cross, observing Maria Catena’s mistreatment, is pained more by the slander than by the nails piercing his flesh.

The song’s sicilianità was accented by new band member Giancarlo Parisi on friscalettu, a Sicilian wood flute.

Consoli followed it with “Piccolo Cesare,” taking aim at a tyrant – a “little Caesar” – who, fearing that his subjects are beginning to think for themselves, tries to suppress the “popular conscience” because it is like a contagious fever that “feeds ideals of equality.”

Eschewing electric guitars, Consoli played only amplified acoustic, as did her longtime collaborator Massimo Roccaforte, who also played banjo, mandolin, and bouzouki. But when Consoli and her band gave makeovers to a couple of numbers from her previous album, *L’Eccezione*, there was no loss of rock ‘n roll power.

“Fiori D’Arancio” (Orange Flowers) bristled with the rage of its narrator, a woman ditched at altar.

“Miranda Odiava i Gatti” (Miranda Used to Hate Cats) was even better. The recurring electric guitar riff from the recorded version was played by multi-instrumentalist Parisi on flute, which softened it a bit. But that just made an effective set-up for the raging, stomping chorus, which lists the irritants big and small that drive the stressed-out Miranda to pick up a pistol and start shooting: social climbers, crowded beaches, religious hypocrites, daisies in black hair, and the smell of cats in heat. Between verses, Consoli made mewling sounds and struck sinuous feline poses.

On “Geisha,” a song of erotic surrender from her 1998 album *Mediamente Isterica*, she injected some aggression, screaming the last line, “Fai di me la tua geisha!” (Make me your geisha.) Shifting emotional gears, she gave a tender rendition of “L’Ultimo Bacio” (The Last Kiss), a gem that provided the title for director Gabriele Muccino’s popular 2001 film.

The evening’s biggest surprise was “Masino,” from *L’Eccezione*. On the recorded version, which is only a minute and a half long, Consoli sings (in siciliano) and plays all the instruments. At the Delacorte she extended and opened it up, making it a driving rocker featuring the redoubtable Giancarlo Parisi, who danced across the stage while soloing on the zampogna, Sicilian bagpipes.



Consoli closed her hour-long set with a rousing “Malarazza” (Evil Breed), a song often attributed to Domenico Modugno, who recorded it in 1976. (The Sicilian trumpeter and bandleader Roy Paci included a hip-hop version on his 2005 album, *Parola D’Onore*.) It’s actually a Sicilian folk song derived from a 19th century stornello by the poet Lionardo Vigo. Consoli said it was about a “good boy” who prays to Jesus to kill his enemy – the boss who treats him worse than a dog. The Gesù of “Malarazza” isn’t a turn-the-other-cheek type. He admonishes the supplicant to stop crying and to instead grit his teeth, pick up a club, and fight back.

As the Central Park concert made evident, Carmen Consoli’s music has evolved, from straight-ahead rock and pop to a style which foregrounds the Sicilian folk elements. Her sound still has the drive and excitement of rock, but the Mediterranean runs through it as never before.

Consoli told the Italian news agency ANSA that with her songs she is recovering the Sicilian past and musical traditions “for too many years obscured by music from abroad.” “I have managed,” she added, “to earn myself a space with my music, with melodies that look to the past and at the same time are modern.”

Her dedication to her homeland’s music is reflected not only in her own work but also in her collaboration with other Sicilian artists, the band I Lautari and the singer Rita Botto. She performed with I Lautari at the Prima Maggio (May Day) concert in Rome this year, and will once again share a Roman stage with them, and Botto, this month (October 2007) in a show billed as “La Musica Antica del Nuovo Millennio.”

Consoli plans to record a new album next year, and it most likely will continue the fusion of Sicilian roots with her unique songwriting sensibility.

Having performed in New York and elsewhere in North America over the past few years, Carmen Consoli, now 33, has won a dedicated, albeit small following here. The goal, according to promoter Mark Gartenberg, who presented her Central Park show, is “to continue to grow a mainstream audience, at least in terms of world/international music, for Carmen.”

Gartenberg, who also has promoted New York shows by Avion Travel and Vincio Capossela, believes that Consoli and other contemporary Italian musicians can reach a broader audience in America. He makes a comparison to Mariza, a Portuguese fado singer, who went from playing small clubs to performing in Carnegie Hall. “In a few years I’d like to get Carmen into rooms like the Beacon Theater [a popular mid-sized Manhattan venue] or Town Hall, maybe the Brooklyn Academy of Music, playing for mixed audiences of Italians and non-Italian international music buffs.”

Gartenberg hopes to book Consoli in similar venues in other major cities in the United States and Canada.

“I believe Carmen has what it takes to do it,” he says.

Carmen Consoli

September 25

Delacorte Theater, Central Park



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