

Fish tales

Simon Rees travelled to the island of Røst high above the Arctic Circle, where a posse of shipwrecked Venetians once transformed the fortunes of a remote Norwegian fishing community. More than 450 years after the event, this unlikely encounter has been celebrated in an opera that draws together the resources of an entire community.

The first thing you notice when you get off the little propeller plane at Røst airport, way out at the end of Norway's Lofoten Islands and 100km north of the Arctic Circle, is the overwhelming smell of dried codfish. For centuries, stockfish has been Røst's only industry. The fish are caught in the winter months and dried on wooden racks until, by the springtime, they are as hard as wood. They are sold to discerning customers from Venice (top quality) to Nigeria (lower grades and fish heads). One of the members of the chorus of *Querini* was, by profession, a fish sorter who could grade stockfish into 20 different grades.

It was the local community on Røst, led by the local diva, soprano Hildegunn Pettersen, which commissioned *Querini* from the Norwegian composer Henning Sommerro. In the opera, Hildegunn took the role of Maria, a 15th-century Venetian noblewoman whose husband is shipwrecked on Røst. In an interview, she told me, 'I cried and cried until I got what I wanted – three good arias. But what was most important was that we should tell this island's particular story.'

The story is, indeed, a unique one. In 1432 the Venetian nobleman and merchant Pietro Querini was sailing from Crete to Bruges with a cargo of wine when his ship went off course and was wrecked off the coast of Ireland. Querini, along with surviving crew members, took to the lifeboats and were carried by the Gulf Stream a thousand miles north to the island of Røst, where they finally managed to land, starving

and injured, in the pitch darkness of the Arctic winter. The survivors were found by local fisherfolk, taken into their homes and nursed back to health. In the spring, a ship from Trondheim took them to the Norwegian mainland, and they returned overland to Venice, bringing with them a cargo of 70 stockfish. From that point, the stockfish trade was established, and it has been running ever since. Querini and his colleagues wrote important accounts of their adventure, including some of the first observations by outsiders of the life led by Norwegian islanders, observations which remain invaluable to ethnographers and historians alike.

Querini opens with a ballad narration delivered by a cormorant, whose head resembled a beaked Venetian carnival mask. The role was taken by Sissel Vera Pettersen, a jazz singer, who concluded each verse with bloodcurdling cormorant shrieks and ululations. Venetian merchants, wrapped in fine silken robes, were first shown departing from Venice, which was represented by a bridge and a gondola, with projections of Canaletto on the cyclorama. The storm that wrecked the *Querina* was terrifyingly depicted by a nausea-inducing film of rough seas, while the doomed vessel was first a flapping sail and then a model that sank beneath cloth waves.



Querini, played by Magne Flemmerlid, a stalwart of the Norwegian Opera, was portrayed as a masterful figure, who kept discipline among his men, even when confronted by the temptations of semi-naked fisherwomen heading for the bathhouse. Back in Venice, Maria's three arias were splendidly delivered by Pettersen, in an approachable idiom that had as much to do with musical theatre as with contemporary opera.

The only real tension of the piece was created by the character of the rapacious island priest, who demanded a payment of seven crowns each from Querini and his men for their board and lodging – a steep charge even by contrast with today's eye-watering Norwegian food and drink prices. There was also a fleeting romance between an Italian sailor and a local girl, but no hearts were broken.

The opera ended with Querini's triumphant return to Venice, and a choral march in praise of stockfish (an operatic first, surely?). A hundredweight of dried fish was carried onto the stage by an anachronistic fork-lift truck, to riotous applause and a standing ovation, well deserved.



THE OPERATOR / TOR HALVORSEN

On location: Magne Fremmerlid as Querini and Hildegunn Pettersen as Maria

The libretto is by Ragnar Olsen, who has translated Shakespeare for the Hålogaland Theatre in Tromsø; the production team of Anne Marit Sæther, Gilles Berger and Monika Stendahl Rokne came from the Cirka Teater, Trondheim. Torodd Wigum, the conductor, is also based in Trondheim, from where he had picked the 'Querini Sinfonietta' of four strings, woodwind and brass, with percussion and synthesiser.

Above all, this was an effective and highly engaging instance of a community coming

together and celebrating its heritage through music and drama. The chorus included many Røst islanders, among them the island's doctor, its current priest and any number of children. An Italian contingent included Venerabile Confraternità del Bacalà alla Vicentina, representing the stockfish restaurateurs of Vicenza, along with Maria Vittoria Querini Scelsi, one of Pietro Querini's descendants.

www.queriniopera.com