

Opera review: Canadian Opera Company's *Il Trovatore* worthy of master composer Giuseppe Verdi

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Elza van den Heever and Ramón Vargas in the Canadian Opera Company's season-opening production of *Il Trovatore* (Michael Cooper photo).

Even in the world's most storied opera houses it is so rare to get such a flawless combination of cast, conductor and production that, for this reason alone, it is worth a dash to the Canadian Opera Company's box office for this season's opening production.

The premiere performance on Saturday night, surrounded by the boisterous celebrations of *Nuit Blanche*, was a glorious soak in excellent singing and gorgeous orchestral work in a traditional production of Giuseppe Verdi's 1853 opera, *Il Trovatore*, borrowed from Opéra de Marseille.

My only quibble with this textbook panorama of Italian grand opera was the dulling effect on the musical splendours by Marc Delamézière's murky, grey lighting on designer Jean-Noël Lavesvre's stark, drab set.

For the good news, let's start with Verdi's score, laden with popular arias, affecting duets and powerful choruses (including the notorious Anvil Chorus). Conductor Marco Guidarini (last seen on the Four Seasons Centre podium for Verdi's *Simon Boccanegra*) is a true master of pacing and getting an unaffected clarity and bounce out of the rich music.

The Canadian Opera Company orchestra itself was up to its customary high standard, following its leader with uncanny accuracy and grace.

The cast was no less excellent, led by stirring performances by the fatally intertwined foursome of Manrico, well sung by Mexican tenor Ramón Vargas, Conte di Luna, local baritone Russell Braun in a strong, surprisingly sympathetic performance, Leonora, fabulously rich-voiced South African soprano Elza van den Heever, and gypsy woman Azucena, iron-voiced Russian mezzo Elena Manistina in full melodramatic flight.

The rest of the large cast was up to the stars' exalted standard, as were the members of Sandra Horst's chorus.

Il Trovatore, which hasn't been seen in Toronto in seven years, may be one of the Big Hits of Italian opera, but it's actually a psychologically two-dimensional series of relatively static set pieces. There is a tale of switched brothers, of conflicted love and a desire of vengeance — all of it expertly rendered in the music. And when it is presented as well as on Saturday, this opera leaves absolutely nothing to be desired.

All director Charles Roubaud had to do was make sure the staging didn't get in the way of the ear candy. Katia Dufлот's period-ish costumes were nice, too — not that we were able to see much of them in the murky light.

There are nine more performances to the end of October. Catch it while you can. You'll find all the details [here](#).