

## Il Trovatore: Verdi Gem Opens COC Season

Joseph So



Verdi's *Il Trovatore* opens the Canadian Opera Company 2012-13 season (foreground: Ramon Vargas, Elza van den Heever; back: Russell Braun. Photo: Robert Cooper)

Verdi: *Il Trovatore*  
Canadian Opera Company  
September 29, 2012 / Four Seasons Centre for the Performing Arts

Ramon Vargas (Manrico)  
Elza van den Heever (Leonora)  
Russell Braun (Conte di Luna)  
Elena Manistina (Azucena)  
Dmitry Belosselskiy (Ferrando)  
Rihab Chaieb (Ines)  
Edgar Ernesto Ramirez (Ruiz)  
Robert Gleadow (Old Gypsy)  
Owen McCausland (Messenger)

COC Opera Orchestra and Chorus  
Marco Guidarini, conductor  
Charles Roubaud, director  
Production of Opera de Marseille

By Joseph So

Call it over-the-top, a warhorse, potboiler, and you are not too far off. There's no official statistics but I venture to say *Il Trovatore* is probably the most parodied of all operas, from Marx Brothers and Bugs Bunny to Gilbert and Sullivan in *The Pirates of Penzance*. Naysayers love to poke fun at the outrageously improbable plot, oom-pah-pah orchestration, stand-and-deliver principals and two-dimensional characters. Verdi surely deserves a medal for cramming so much plot into two hours of music - a love triangle, mistaken identity, kidnapping, filial piety, revenge, murder, poison, suicide, burning at the stake and beheading, everything but the kitchen sink, as the

saying goes! Yet, with fine singers, a great orchestra led by a seasoned conductor, *Il Trovatore* can be a thrilling evening at the opera. And when it is as good as last evening's performance which marked the opening of the COC's 2012-13 season, it can be downright sensational.

First and foremost, *Il Trovatore* is about voices. The COC has assembled a very fine cast, headed by Mexican tenor Ramon Vargas in his first-ever Manrico. A Verdian through and through, Vargas is a celebrated Fenton, Alfredo, Duke, Riccardo, Jacopo, Don Carlos, Gabriel Adorno among others - totaling twelve roles in all. Now he is adding his most dramatic Verdi tenor role yet, the troubadour Manrico. He is joined by South-African soprano Elza van den Heever as Leonora. Russian mezzo Elena Manistina is Azucena and Canadian baritone Russell Braun sings his first Count di Luna. The sparsely handsome if excessively austere production comes from Opera de Marseille - huge, subtly textured walls with minimal props, so darkly lit that sometimes one has to strain to see who's on stage. Looking on the bright side (pun intended), one is spared the usually ubiquitous gypsy paraphernalia, and the murky lighting makes the mistaken identity in Act One almost believable. In the obligatory Anvil Chorus in this production, it's all about repairs to the wagon wheels, an interesting concept! The opera has been time shifted from the 15th century to some indeterminate era, likely late 19th century, based on the barracks in Act One Scene One and the uniform of di Luna. Overall, this production works well, and thankfully it's interpretively neutral - no oil refineries spewing pollution and no rebels carrying machine guns a la Bregenz. What we do get is a pared down, atmospheric production, with little visual distraction and no gimmicky *mis-en-scene*, allowing the audience to focus on the singing and the music.

And great singing it was from the principals. At the risk of being a little irreverent, the opulent soprano of Elza van den Heever reminds me of a luxury sedan, say the Mercedes S550. As a passenger/listener you are cushioned in velvet, the ride is like floating on air. Given its V8 engine, it's big and has plenty of power in reserve, which is unleashed at the right moment, but most of the time it's kept in check. The top is free and easy, and on this occasion, the soprano threw in several interpolated high Cs in Act 4. The voice is at its best in *cantilena*, particularly D'amor sull'ali rosee and Tacea la notte placida, both sung with nice legato and lovely high pianissimos, including a piano high C in each aria. Only in the *cabaletta* when the voice is made to move is it less convincing, especially in a couple of the runs where she slowed right down - after all luxury sedans aren't supposed to run slalom races! In all seriousness, Ms. van den Heever's voice is remarkable and let's hope she returns to the Company in the future.

The other revelation on opening night was Mexican tenor Ramon Vargas. Who would have thought a Nemorino and Duke would be such a wonderful Manrico? He sang it without the huge volume of a dramatic tenor, but he phrased beautifully and the voice was clear, focused and ringing. Only in the Di quella pira - without the *da capo* - was the voice a bit swarmed by the loud orchestra, even with the singer going full throttle. As he said in an interview I had with him three weeks ago, Manrico is essentially a lyric role - after all Verdi composed it for the same tenor who sang Alfredo and the Duke. With time and further working of the role into his voice, Manrico may well be a new calling card for Vargas. As Azucena, Russian Elena Manistina has a huge, rich, ringing dramatic mezzo, a voice with plenty of squillo. She was impressive in every sense of the word - no wonder she won the 2002 Operalia. Her voice is the genuine article.

The other piece of big news was Canadian baritone Russell Braun in his first ever Verdi role, as Conte di Luna. Braun sang with his trademark mellifluous tone and musicality, and he acted the villain with conviction. But it should be said that he is not one would call a "natural" Verdi baritone. His beautiful instrument doesn't have the booming volume and the cutting edge for these big dramatic Verdi roles. Braun sang with exemplary elegance and expression, but the voice was occasionally under strain, as in the top note at the end of Il balen. Russian bass Dmitry Belosselskiy was a sonorous Ferrando. The smaller roles were expertly taken, particularly deserving of mention were the Ines of mezzo Rihab Chaieb as a perfect foil for Leonora, and the gorgeous one-liner of Ruiz sung by Mexican-Canadian tenor Edgar Ernesto Ramirez. The augmented chorus under Sandra Horst outdid itself. Conductor Marco Guidarini led the excellent COC Orchestra in a well paced, incisive reading of the score. The last two performances will have fast-rising Italian tenor Riccardo Massi singing Manrico. He made his Met debut as Radames and has sung leading roles in Munich, Paris and Berlin. Two fine tenors in town at the same time - what a luxury! Bring on the rest of the season!

*Il Trovatore* runs from Sept. 29 to Oct. 31 at the Four Seasons Centre in 8 performances. <http://coc.ca/>