

OPERA REVIEW

Il Trovatore is a triumph, against the odds

Il Trovatore
The Canadian Opera Company
At the Four Seasons Centre
in Toronto on Saturday

REVIEWED BY
ROBERT HARRIS

The Canadian Opera Company kicked off its 2012-13 season with a stunning, virtually note-perfect production of a deeply powerful, but deeply flawed opera, Verdi's *Il Trovatore*. (The Troubador). It's long been noted that despite its popularity, *Trovatore's* libretto is so weak and convoluted that there's very little true drama in it – too many coincidences, too many improbable situations, no consistent development.

Actually, the problem with *Trovatore* is not that there's too little drama in it – it's that there's too much.

Led by Verdi's psychologically acute musical instinct, *Trovatore* is full of scenes of revenge, love requited and unrequited, tenderness between mother and child, anger between political and erotic rivals, tragedy, hopelessness, pain and death. It's just that none of them hang together in a coherent pattern. For a production of *Trovatore* not to be weighed down by these emotional gyrations, one thing is necessary. A cast of singers whose skill, beauty and power can overcome the weaknesses that surround them. Such a cast is rare. But we have one in this COC production of the opera.

Trovatore, even with its mass scenes of soldiers and gypsies (the latter singing the famous "Anvil Chorus") is essentially a chamber opera, with four characters interacting with each other, combining in solos, duets, and trios (we'd have a quartet but the leading lady dies on us just before it would start). A quartet of characters with which Freud would have had a field day – two aspects of the male persona – baritone and tenor, nobleman and rebel troubadour (who are actually, unknown to them, brothers) and two aspects of the female – soprano and mezzo, the noble lady-in-waiting, torn by her love, and the gypsy woman, consumed, burnt to a delirium, by passion and revenge. Each of



Elena Manistina (middle), as Azucena, builds the opera's emotional centre. MICHAEL COOPER

these operatic concoctions has its own range, both vocal and emotional, and when their combined power is unleashed, *Trovatore* is a wonder to behold, not a melodrama to be endured.

An opera with four superstars: that's the ideal, an ideal met gloriously by the COC. Russian mezzo Elena Manistina is a powerful, frightening, yet lyrical Azucena, the gypsy woman with a horrible secret and a heart full of revenge

and pain. Her Act 2 exposition of the death of her mother, burnt at the stake, sparks the opera to life, and builds its emotional centre. Without a completely convincing performance, that cohesion would never appear, but Manistina kept it alive all night. Her counterpart, South African soprano Elza van der Heyer, playing Leonora, appearing here just months before her Met debut, is a Verdi singer with

a difference. She wins over her audience not with megawatt power but with a lyrical clarity and agility to her voice that is immensely dramatic and touching. Verdi wrote a fourth Act for *Trovatore* that is virtually a series of solo pieces for Leonora, and van der Heyer's touching heart-break in her aria, *D'amor sull'ali rosee*, was one of the highlights in an evening full of highlights.

On the male side, tenor Ramon Vargas, playing the title character, Manrico, is one of the great voices on the operatic stage today, and didn't disappoint. In his duets both with his gypsy mother and his noble lover, he sang with a restraint and an ability to blend with his fellow singers that is rare in a great solo artist. And his solo aria of sweetness and love, *Ah si, ben mio collessere* was beautifully fashioned. And although it's impossible with a cast of this calibre to single out a favourite, Canadian Russell Braun's Conte di Luna was a bit of perfection. Braun not only sang his part with an effortless stream of perfectly modulated sound, he worked hard to try and turn di Luna from something of a cardboard character into a real personality whose obsessional motivations, of both love and revenge, had meaning.

These four voices were by turns touchingly vulnerable or strikingly powerful, and they were given an equally powerful backing by a tightly disciplined COC orchestra, led by Marco Guidarini, who lent a freshness to Verdi's score revealing the many musical delights often buried under the boredom of players doing one *Trovatore* too many. And the sets of Jean-Noël Lavesvre, alternately brooding and darkly evocative, along with the dramatic lighting of Marc Delameziere, which cast ominously giant shadows over the stage all evening (the production was created for the Opera de Marseille) supported the night-drenched mood of the drama perfectly.

You may have seen this opera before. And you may see it again. But you probably won't ever see it performed as well.

Il Trovatore runs until Oct. 31.

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