

Preview

Opera Circle to produce Bellini's *Norma*

by Mike Telin



Opera composer Vincenzo Bellini once said: “If I were shipwrecked at sea, I would leave all the rest of my operas and try to save *Norma*.” Indeed, of all Bellini’s operas, *Norma* has remained the favorite of audiences around the world. On Friday, November 16, at 7:30 pm and Sunday, November 18th, at 3:00 pm in First Baptist Church, Opera Circle opens their 2012-13 season with Bellini’s tragic tale.

“It is a story of feelings and how people act and react to those feelings. It is about the psychology of human nature,” says soprano and Opera Circle executive director Dorota Sobieska, who will perform the role of Norma, the Druid high priestess, who is forced to make difficult life choices ([read a synopsis here](#)). For people who may not be familiar with the work, Sobieska likens it to a psychological thriller; “The opera is full of internal tragedy and you need to get into the psychology of the characters.”

Sobieska feels the key to understanding the characters can be found in the music: “Bellini was great at using harmony for dramatic effect in creating a variety of moods, and the music is expressive of the characters’ feelings. Norma was of two minds about killing or not killing her children and all that psychological turmoil is imbedded in the music. This is the best opera music ever, it sets a standard that is difficult to match.” Indeed, the opera is thought of as a prime example of the bel canto tradition, and its signature tune, *Casta diva*, remains one of the most popular arias of all time.

For these performances Opera Circle returns to their signature style, bel canto performed in a chamber production that allows the cast and orchestra to be physically close to the audience, reminiscent of the company’s recent performances of *Werther*.

“On the one hand it is a chamber-size production but on the other, because of the closeness of the audience, the feeling is that the audience is creating the production itself. It is a very powerful style,” Sobieska says. “Producing it in First Baptist will allow the audience to feel as though they are sitting in the middle of everything and that is our intention. You cannot take this production to an auditorium that seats 3,000, it simply wouldn’t work.”

Sobieska also points out that despite the fact that Norma is usually staged in a grand opera style, when you look into the music, it is very doable in a chamber style. “But you do really have to look inside it and not be swayed by the tradition of it being produced on a huge scale,” she says.

Opera Circle’s music director Jacek Sobieski has proven himself to be an expert at reducing large opera orchestrations for smaller forces, and for this production he has chosen to use 13 musicians. Additionally Sobieski will be conducting from the piano, something he says the composer did as well. “Bellini performed his operas from the piano with orchestra, so this is historically accurate. We are performing with single instruments of strings, winds, brass and timpani, so the piano gives the orchestra a fullness of sound.”

But what excites Dorota Sobieska most about the opera is the music. “It is pure Bellini. It doesn’t get any better than this” she says. “He was a young genius who died at 33. Many of us wonder what could have done if he had lived longer”.

Norma will be performed in Italian with English supertitles. In addition to Sobieska as Norma, the cast includes soprano Natasha Ospina as Adalgisa, tenor Dominick Rodriguez as Pollione, bass Laurentiu Rotaru as Oroveso, mezzo-soprano Laura Avdey as Clotilde, and tenor Jake Sonnenberg as Flavio, backed up by the Opera Circle Chorus.

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