

Opera Circle: *Il trovatore* at Bohemian National Hall (February 17)

By Robert Rollin



Last Friday night, February 17, Opera Circle joined forces with the Cleveland Women's Orchestra to present Giuseppe Verdi's *Il trovatore* at the Bohemian National Hall. Opera Circle is headed by executive director Dorota Sobieska, one of Northeast Ohio's most talented sopranos, and music director and chorus master Jacek Sobieski, a former music director of Warsaw's Polish National Theater. Robert Croquist, the Cleveland

Women's Orchestra's longtime music director, served as conductor.

The production was blessed with a talented cast. The four leads included soprano Dorota Sobieska, as Leonora; tenor Dominick Rodriguez, Manrico; mezzo-soprano Christina Carr, Azucena, the gypsy mother of Manrico; and baritone Brian Keith Johnson, the Count of Luna. The plot traces the ill-fated conflict between the noble Luna family and a family of gypsies.

As Act one commenced, Ferrando, the count's elderly captain of the guard, played by Jason Budd, recollected a terrible happening of 15 years before: an old gypsy was burned at the stake for bewitching the Count's younger brother, making the child weak and ill. Azucena, the gypsy's daughter, avenged her mother by abducting the boy and was suspected of burning him. Budd, who has the wonderful vocal quality of a true basso, was consistently excellent as Ferrando.

Croquist conducted briskly, and except for a few chorus ensemble problems, did very well indeed. Act I intonation issues took place among clarinet and bassoon, but generally improved as the opera continued. After a nice Scene 2 string prelude, Leonora told Inez, her confidante, about first meeting Manrico, and performed some stunning stratospheric

coloratura. The Count appeared, followed by Manrico, and Luna challenged him to a duel. Johnson's entry as the count was powerful. The closing trio was exceptional.

Act II's opening scene in the Gypsy mountain camp had Azucena brooding about her mother's death, while the Gypsies sang and worked. The famous Anvil Chorus went beautifully. A nice use of piccolo doubling high violins, the sound of a high triangle, the anvil's clanging, and a lovely contrasting a cappella, displayed Verdi's wonderful coloristic talents. Carr sang some lovely arias, but was at times a bit overbalanced. A few wobbles in her vibrato marred an otherwise fine performance. The dramatic exchanges between Azucena and Manrico added power. Rodriguez, as Manrico, sang beautifully. He is blessed with a gorgeously dark tenor voice which he consistently used to the production's advantage. Verdi's clever musical skill showed itself in the Anvil Chorus' return. Scene 2 took place outside the Convent. Leonora (Sobieska) gave her reasons for joining the convent to her confidant Inez in an exquisite high range aria. Later the wonderful timbre of women's chorus intermingled with the excited voices of Manrico and Count Luna locked in combat and provided some of the opera's best moments.

The Count captured Azucena outside the fortress of Castellor to start Act III. Luna's aria as he planned the Gypsy's execution was most effective. Scene 2 moved inside, and Manrico left suddenly to rescue his mother. In Act IV the wonderful duet between Leonora and an off-stage Manrico, had him asking for death, and Leonora for the chance to follow him to the tomb. Notwithstanding a small ensemble glitch, the duet was lovely. Leonora and Luna shared a forceful duet. Here Luna falsely promised not to kill Manrico and Leonora took poison. Manrico and Azucena were equally outstanding in their final scene together and were joined by Leonora for some exquisite singing.

Perhaps the production's biggest problem was its location on an 1890's stage with limited scene-changing capabilities. As a result, the supposedly short changes between scenes within a single act were prolonged into additional ten-minute pauses. The pauses, added to the three regular intermissions, dampened the dramatic flow. This musical evening, replete with very talented singers, highlighted the need for Opera Circle to have a permanent home as it continues to grow in stature in the community.

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