

Opera Circle Cleveland: a conversation With *Il trovatore* conductor Joel Smirnoff

by Mike Telin



For its season finale, Opera Circle Cleveland will present Giuseppe Verdi's *Il trovatore* on Saturday, June 11 at 7:30 pm at the Ohio Theatre in Playhouse Square. Based on a Spanish play by Antonio Garcia Gutierrez adapted by Verdi's librettist Salvatore Cammarano, the opera is the middle child in the trio of popular titles Verdi produced in the early 1850s, preceded by *Rigoletto* and followed by *La traviata*.

Joel Smirnoff will conduct the Opera Circle Orchestra and a cast including tenor Jorge Pita Carreras as Manrico, baritone Kevin Wetzel as Il Conte di Luna, mezzo-soprano Christina Carr as Azucena, soprano Dorota Sobieska as Leonora, bass Nathan Resika as Ferrando, tenor Brian Skoog as Ruiz, and soprano Lauren Wright as Inez.

Verdi had originally intended to name the opera *Azucena* after the gypsy whose mother is sentenced to death for bewitching the youngest child of the Count di Luna. Azucena's mother commands her daughter to avenge her execution by abducting the Count's baby, Manrico. Confused, Azucena throws her own son onto the execution pyre and raises Manrico as her own child.

The plot is complicated. Verdi realized that too, and chose to begin with a long recitative where Ferrando, the captain of the Queen's guards, relates the back story of the opera to his soldiers. National Public Radio and Houston Grand Opera have helpfully put it into modern terms [here](#).

It is often said that great art is not just about what happened in the past, but also what is happening today. Joel Smirnoff believes that what makes *Il trovatore* topical is that its plot is grounded in prejudice. "What triggers the chain of tragic occurrences is the

perception that Azucena's mother is going to bewitch this child because she is a Gypsy," Smirnoff said during a recent interview. "This is what starts the whole thing — not the actions, but the perception. Interestingly, the 'Anvil Chorus,' one of the most memorable parts of the opera, is sung by the Gypsies."

Smirnoff said that the opera's power is based in the tensions between the various factions of society — a theme familiar in today's world. "Nothing is quite stable. There's a sense that the ground is moving below you at all times. The only thing that does seem stable is the strength of the Gypsies in terms of their culture and a shared human experience. Azucena is the key character in the opera. She's the most active and by far the strongest person."

Although this production is Smirnoff's first *Il trovatore*, he is no stranger to Verdi's works — he began his celebrated career as a violinist in the pit of the Lyric Opera of Chicago. He pointed out that conducting Verdi presents some challenges, specifically when it comes to pacing. "You need to be steady, but you also need to be able to communicate subtle changes in the tempo. Verdi's arias are embedded in the action — all of a sudden you realize that you are in the middle of an aria and listening to a great melody. Because of that the conductor also has to be able to expand the tempo, although you do want to keep moving it forward."

Smirnoff noted that in addition to tempo, there's also the challenge of guaranteeing that the opera's great moments are truly great. "You want to make sure the listener recognizes those moments. Time stops in a certain way, like in the fourth-act duet 'Miserere' (Lord, thy mercy on this soul). You want to put some clarity into a rather long string of events, and that clarity comes from making sure that those moments are going to be great moments. That's what I'm enjoying about preparing for this production."

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