

The Day

CLO Hits Its Stride With 'La Traviata'

By Milton Moore - Published on 4/28/2009

Sunday's performance of Verdi's "La Traviata" at the Garde Arts Center in New London felt like a coming of age for the Connecticut Lyric Opera.

This company started six seasons ago with baling-wire-and-duct-tape productions in a church sanctuary, with sets, lighting, costumes, even casting, all improvised.

On Sunday, the Lyric Opera staged its third performance on the big stage at the Garde, and it made an artistic and production leap into new territory. It earned a prolonged standing ovation from the audience of about 500 with a performance on a par with the touring companies that stop here. Yes, it had its weaknesses - the male choristers (all volunteers) and some odd directorial choices - but this was a fully staged, fully satisfying night at the opera.

But above all, it was a triumph for soprano Jurate Svedaite, who has been at the very heart of this company from the start, singing most of its soprano leads. The role of Violetta, the fallen woman of "La Traviata," is the do-or-die for a soprano star, the role against which all others are judged. The vocal demands call for moments of longing lyricism, of florid coloratura and of spinto fireworks. Since "La Traviata" is perhaps the best-known opera, there's little room to fake it.

From the Act 1 vocal showpiece "E strano/Sempre libera" to her aching final scene, Svedaite commanded the stage. She was ably supported by tenor Jeffrey Hartman, who was vocally guarded at the start, but by the Act 2 caballeta "O mio rimorso" let loose with a powerful, ringing Italianate sound. The pair was nicely balanced in its duets, especially in a poignant final act "Pairigi, o cara."

Baritone Chad Karl sang the key role of Alfredo's father, the elder Germont, with the needed gravitas. His long Act 2 duet with Svedaite, which contained some of her most beautiful moments, was marred by metronomic conducting by Adrian Sylveen Mackiewicz, who gave Svedaite little room to breathe in the lovely "Dite alla giovine." Aside from moments of insensitivity to the expressive needs of the singers, the orchestra played very well under Mackiewicz, with the long violin obbligato opening Act 4 by Brunilda Myftaraj especially fine.

The minimalist set worked well, as did the costuming, a sort of vague 1920s-ish allusion to Parsian night life. The directing for the opening party scene was lively, and the volunteer choristers stayed animated without overreaching. The Act 3 party scene lost its focus, but Verdi's score and the lead voices put it back on track.

The night really belonged to Svedaite, whose Violetta was a fully committed performance - vocally thrilling and emotionally wrenching. Her transformation from party girl to victim felt complete, and she carried the opera's tragic closing pages with a conviction that erased the melodrama.

This Lyric Opera production will now go on the road, with stagings in three other Connecticut venues. And talk in the Garde Sunday was that one of the company's 2009-2010 productions will be melded into the Garde's Opera Series package alongside the touring companies.

"La Traviata" showed they've earned it.