



Amazing set brings Bellini's Opera alive

Oman Observer

On two evenings last weekend, the Royal Opera House Muscat presented Bellini's lyrical tragedy, "Norma", in a co-production with Opera de Rouen. Unlike his "La Sonnambula" presented last month, this 1831, 3-hour 'bel canto' masterpiece has a tragic ending, praised by Verdi for its 'elevation of thought'.

Audiences in Oman experienced not only a collaboration of Opera Houses but a synthesis of soloists, chorus, orchestra, set and costume design, video creation and choreography. It was an ambitious project, conceived and directed by the innovative Belgian Stage Director, Frederic Roels. He was partnered by expert 'bel canto' conductor, Fabrizio Maria Carminati, familiar with Muscat audiences from the Pavarotti Tribute Gala Concert in December.

The most striking element in Opera de Rouen's 2017 production was the evocative woodland set, designed by French designer, Bruno de Lavenere. It gave a sense of claustrophobia, while the huge gaping circle above provided a glimpse into the brighter world of Roman society which heralded a new civilisation and 'better gods'. Through this window, the extraordinary young

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French video designer, Etienne Guiol, created projections of a looming giant moon, a starry night or a cloudy red sky which became a fire in the final scene. Norma is a powerful Druid priestess in 50BC Gaul, occupied by Romans and whose people constantly seek liberation from their enemy, but cannot wage war unless permission is granted by their prophetic priestess, Norma. She, however, has had an illicit affair with Pollione, Commander of the army and Proconsul. She had two sons by him (played charmingly by 4 young Muscat school children), who must be kept hidden underground as her vows as a priestess forbid any contact with men, far less with the enemy.

The incredibly demanding title role was sung by the superb Romanian Bel Canto Soprano, Elena Mosuc, a rising star on the world stage. What was breathtakingly arresting in Ms Mosuc's vocal control was her wide dynamic range, especially the ability to sustain soft notes in her high register. Opposite her was the acclaimed Belgian tenor, Marc Laho, as the unfaithful Pollione who only redeems himself through a final, selfless sacrifice. The plot is as far fetched as in any opera, but provides a vehicle for Bellini's long, weaving melodies and coloratura passages. Pollione has fallen in love with the young priestess, Adalgisa, and forsaken his former lover Norma, for whom his feelings have become 'cold as ice'. A love triangle therefore develops which is mirrored in Dominique Boivin's choreography for the Beau Geste modern dance trio. They performed elegantly above on a bridge during long, static sections of the music, to reflect and develop the relationships between their shadow characters below, which some found distracting.

Adalgisa was sung beautifully by the young French-Armenian Soprano, Anna Kasyan, a bel canto role almost as demanding as the lead, and with no less passion or emotion. Duets between the two leading sopranos were poignant and sublime in both Acts. Head Druid and Norma's father, Oroveso, carried the weight of duty and age. He was sung brilliantly by the Polish Bass-Baritone, Wojtek Smilek, whose warm and rich vocal timbre bore gravity and stage presence each time he appeared. Other parts were sung with equal poise by mezzo-soprano, Albane Carrere, as Clotilde, Norma's companion and nurse to her children, and Kevin Amiel, one of the most talented tenors of his generation, as Flavio, Pollione's confidant and guard.

From the pit, the opera was accompanied in Bellini's sometimes sparse score by the Orchestra Opera de Rouen Normandie, conducted by Carminati with subtle sensitivity and balance. On stage, the chorus-in-residence, Accentus, played a prominent role as commentators on the action, or the men as Gallic warriors. They were dressed in generic 'traditional' costumes, a hotchpotch which would do attendees at the Stonehenge summer solstice festival proud. Belgian Designer, Lionel Lesire, included plenty of colour to lighten the browns of the set, with a nod at Scottish tartan as the Celtic peoples who thumbed their noses at the Roman invaders in Britain. The Druid priestesses themselves wore white gowns over their character dresses: white for the innocent young Adalgisa and dark blue for the mature, matronly Norma. Clotilde was clad in a curious bright blue slinky number which could have graced any period drama, while Pollione wore an oddly brown suit with matching cloak.

In Act 1 Norma has a famous soliloquy as she raises her eyes to the moon to pray for calm in her people's hearts. Norma's heart is neither pure nor tranquil,



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burning as it is with her impious love for Pollione. The famous 'Casta Diva' (Chaste goddess) Aria brought the audience to rapturous applause in response to Ms Mosuc's expressive qualities of tone and precision, demonstrated so early on in the opera.

The role demands exacting flexibility in its bel canto ornamentation, and she proved herself more than equal in her wide emotional range, so celebrated in the iconic performances of Maria Callas or Joan Sutherland. Act 2 demonstrated Marc Laho's broad vocal range and the warmth in his sustained high register, remembered from his fine performance as Nadir in Bizet's "Pearl Fishers" at ROHM in May last year. The production was long and intense, but the demand for sustained concentration was richly rewarded by the opportunity to witness these stellar performers of the World Stage, live in Muscat.

Georgina Benison



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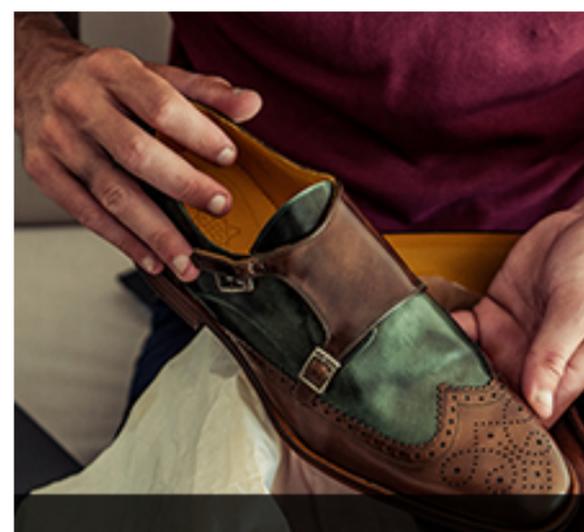
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