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The spectacle — and the singing — make Lyric's 'Aida' grand

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As every opera lover knows, ours is not exactly a golden age of Verdi singing. With full-fledged Italian dramatic voices in short supply, even the major opera companies must scramble to assemble even satisfactory casts for such enduringly popular if vocally demanding fare as Verdi's "Aida."

Surprise! The international cast Lyric Opera has assembled for its first set of performances of the Verdi work — the grandest money machine in grand opera — is one of the strongest the company has fielded in the 29 years the Nicolas Joel production has held the boards at the Civic Opera House. Different singers are to assume the five principal roles for a second series of performances in March.

"Aida," which had its first performance of the season on Saturday night, perfectly satisfies the craving most opera-goers have for big vocal display, lavish spectacle and intimate human tragedy, all wrapped in some of Verdi's most gloriously inspired music. Shakespeare would have been proud to have penned such a libretto: In "Aida" the characters' passions compel them to make what they believe are necessary choices that nonetheless make their fate inescapable.

It helped to have Italian conductor Renato Palumbo, who displayed his Verdian credentials at the helm of "Macbeth" last year and "Ernani" the season before that, back in the pit, shaping instrumental lines and keeping things moving with keen dramatic thrust and musical sensitivity. Once again he had the orchestra speaking robust, authentic Verdi. The score was presented without musical cuts.

Sondra Radvanovsky has become Chicago's Verdi lyric-dramatic soprano of choice. Aida is her latest Verdi role at Lyric, following her successful Amelia, Elvira and Leonora, and it made a good vocal and dramatic fit. The voice has grown in size and depth, if not invariably in color, with each role. Aida's great aria, "O patria mia," drew the evening's biggest ovation, and for good reason. The American soprano invested the *romanza* with lustrous sound and a melting legato, floating the soft climactic phrases ravishingly. Whenever the music soared, so did Radvanovsky.

What's more, her statuesque stage presence and skills as a singing actress made believable the dire situation in which the Ethiopian princess-turned-Egyptian-slave finds herself — trapped between her love for the Egyptian soldier Radames (Marcello Giordani) and her devotion to her homeland and to her father, the captured Ethiopian king Amonasro (Gordon Hawkins).

Giordani left a rather more mixed impression. The Italian tenor struck the requisite stalwart poses and cut a heroic figure despite the unflattering wig and outsized robe-cum-breastplate with which costume designer Pet Halmen outfitted Radames. The voice remains healthy and he still can trumpet clarion high notes to the back of the house. But his inability or unwillingness to sing softly (the high B-flat at the end of "Celeste Aida" was delivered in standard can-belto fashion) and the loss of vocal presence in the middle and lower registers were worrisome.

The role of Amneris, the pharaoh's daughter, is an interesting change from the German roles Lyric audiences associate with Jill Grove. And while the American mezzo-soprano did not sound like a true Italianate dramatic mezzo, I found her performance splendidly sung and consistently involving, not only because of her dark tonal luster (especially in the low range) but the keen dramatic conviction she brought to her confrontations with Aida and Radames. She was the most unfortunate victim of the costumer's penchant for voluminous mums.

The weak link was Hawkins, whose unsteady, constricted baritone pitched Amonasro rather on one dramatic note, as a warrior of angry political calculation, little more. Bass Raymond Aceto gave a stern and sturdy accounting of Ramfis' priestly platitudes.

Matthew Lata's faithful recreation of the original staging had the King of Egypt perched atop a mile-high litter borne by attendants, leaving bass Evan Boyer little chance to make much effect vocally. Cecelia Hall, another member of Lyric's Ryan Opera Center apprentice program, floated the offstage priestess' song nicely. Bernard Holcomb sang the messenger. The chorus, prepared by Michael Black, acquitted itself very well, whether as priests, priestesses or members of the royal court.

These performances mark the fifth time around at Lyric for the Joel production, and it remains a handsome, smoothly-functioning show, predicated on fluid scene changes involving painted-realism scrims, antique Egyptian iconography and towering, red-lit (by Jason Brown) temple columns. A mechanical malfunction on opening night stranded a boat on the Nile as stagehands labored to move it into the wings. The triumphal scene offered the requisite pomp and spectacle — a procession of golden statues, choristers in bulbous headgear, hordes of extras and plenty of trumpets.

The ballet sequences, choreographed by Kenneth von Heidecke, were nicely integrated into the action and were precisely and sinuously executed by the 18 principal dancers under August Tye's direction.

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Lyric Opera's current run of "Aida" runs through Feb. 8 at the Civic Opera House, 20 N. Wacker Drive. Performances resume March 6 with a second cast. \$34-\$224; 312-332-2244, lyricopera.org.

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