



Un ballo in maschera – The Grand, Leeds

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Music: Giuseppe Verdi

Libretto: Antonio Somma

Director: Tim Albery

Reviewer: Dawn Smallwood

Un ballo in maschera (A Masked Ball) is Opera North's first ever staging of this opera, forming part of the *Fatal Passions* season this winter. Verdi's opera is not as well known compared to his other works such as *Aida*, *La Traviata* and *Rigoletto*, however, it gives the audience an opportunity to see this anticipated new production.

This three-act opera was composed in 1859 and was premiered in Rome the same year. Antonio Somma's libretto is set to Verdi's musical composition and tells the story of King Gustavo of Sweden's assassination and the events leading up to it. The dark opera offers plenty to digest such as the political conspiracies, the power battles and the passionate heights of the love triangle. King Gustavo (Rafael Rojas) is in love with Amelia (Adrienn Miksch), the wife of Count Anckarström (Phillip Rhodes) who is the King's closest friend and aide. This leads to tragic consequences for them and the community.

Verdi's music is renowned for its contrasts and Thomas C. Hase's lighting and Hannah Clark's modern stark but simplistic staging reflects this spirit in the performance. The highlight must be the ensemble in Act 3 during the ball where the chorus ensemble harmoniously sings and wears matching identical costumes and contrasting white wigs and masks. This silhouetted effect creates the known and unknown moods of the party and is beautifully coordinated and choreographed, courtesy of Laila Diallo.

Verdi packs in a lot of content, reflected by the wide variety of musical instruments used, in his composition. There is a lot of activity happening such as the heightened emotions in its politically motivated and passionate arias and the dramatic tensions unfolding in its harmonic ensembles and choruses. There are innuendoes and references to the story which at the time

Verdi had to disguise as he composed when censorship and conventions were at its height particularly with regards to politics and religion in the mid 19th Century.

Un ballo in maschera makes the perfect tragedy with a fatal love triangle and the strong themes of love, jealousy, betrayal and revenge being the main ingredients. The company of Opera North as expected puts on an excellent performance, particularly from the principal leads. Verdi would be proud of how his opera is portrayed today and certainly shares how he really felt about the political environment he was living in at the time.

A Swedish tragedy all around, plagued with misunderstanding and preconceptions, which is relived this season with Verdi's musical ingenuity and certainly a must see.

Reviewed on 3 February 2018 | Image: Clive Barda