

From Music in Cincinnati

A "Carmen" to Love

Posted in: **Reviews**

By Mary Ellyn Huton

Jul 23, 2009 - 4:41:48 PM



William Burden as Don Jose and Ruxandra Donose as Carmen. Photo for Cincinnati Opera by Philip Groshong

Cincinnati Opera knows how to turn SOS into SO.

Bizet's "Carmen" which opened Wednesday night (July 22) at Music Hall was officially sold out and with two performances to come, is likely to add considerably to the Opera's bottom line.

(Austerity measures announced earlier this season in response to the economic downturn included layoffs, salary reductions and, perhaps ironically, cutting a fourth performance of "Carmen.")

But it wasn't just Bizet's blockbuster that turned the trick, since "Carmen" tends to sell itself just by appearing on the season schedule. It was also the way the Opera sold it, with a blitz of media-savvy initiatives, including: "Carmenbook," a Facebook spoof where Carmen becomes a fan of Don Jose and, uh oh, the Toreador; "Lego Carmen," a YouTube video with Legos as the characters; and most potent of all, announcement of the winner of Cincinnati Opera's new "Opera Idol" competition just before the opening night curtain.

Modeled on "American Idol," "Opera Idol" sought "Cincinnati's new opera star" through a community-wide auditions process, beginning in June. The winner was selected by a final online vote, that drew over 10,000 responses and considerable attention to Cincinnati Opera. The

top winner, soprano Margaret Russo of Columbia-Tusculum, prefaced the Overture to "Carmen" with a melting rendition of "Musetta's Waltz" from "La Boheme."

Happily, this "Carmen" -- 168th performance of the popular work since Cincinnati Opera's founding in 1920 -- lives up to all this effort.

For one thing, it comes across fully and satisfyingly as a tragedy, even a love story, not just a they-got-what-they-deserved tale of lust and its fruits. As Don Jose -- tenor William Burden in a stunning role debut -- cradled the dying Carmen in his arms at the end, it was easy to ache for the small town boy who truly loved her.

For her part, Romanian born Ruxandra Donose portrayed Carmen as more than a heartless predator. Though a serial lover who craves liberty above all things, she loves Don Jose, and Donose made her warmth and affection clear, even as she faced his jealous rage and accepted her fate at the end.

Why Don Jose loves Carmen is apparent, as Donose is the most fetching, vivacious Carmen one could wish for. Not only does she have a luscious voice, but she can dance -- the gypsy band held her aloft during their wild dance in act II -- play castanets and crack a whip in time to the music (act I, "habanera"). Her every note and gesture revealed a singing actress of the first order.

Burden, who got the biggest hand at the end, displayed a thrilling tenor voice and he pumped all of the conflicting elements into Don Jose's character: remorse, apprehension and ultimately, uncontrollable passion.

Soprano Sandra Lopez portrayed selfless, blue-skirted Micaela beautifully, her silvery voice and keen, earnest demeanor linking Don Jose to the goodness and innocence he has regretfully left behind.

Dwayne Croft, with his handsome, virile baritone, gave the Toreador a stronger, more youthful presence than is generally achieved by more darkly colored voices. Macho with a capital "M," he climbed atop a table in Lillas Pastias' inn to vocally assert his prowess in the bullring.

Supporting roles were well filled, with baritone Earl Patriarco as a bluff Zuniga, tenors Steven Cole and tenor Ric Furman as the often riotous gypsy sidekicks Remendado and Dancairo, and soprano Amita Prakash and mezzo-soprano Elizabeth Pojanowski as Carmen's friends Frasquita and Mercedes.

"Carmen" is a big opera, with wonderful crowd scenes full of chorus and ballet. These were eye-filling in Music Hall, from the gleeful Children's Chorus in act I mimicking the soldiers on guard, to members of the Cincinnati Opera Chorus as soldiers and the girls of the cigarette factory. The

women not only ogled the soldiers deliciously, but had fun flying in their act I cat fight after Carmen and Manuelita's dispute in the factory.

Mark Streshinsky's painstaking direction was unfailingly lively and detailed, keeping the audience continually informed and engrossed in the action. Cincinnati Ballet artistic director Victoria Morgan provided vivid choreography for the dancers who sparked the crowd scenes and the gypsy gathering at the inn.



Photo by Philip Groshong

A too-often unsung hero of the production -- a period one from Houston Grand Opera with the walls of Seville morphing into an inn, a mountain passage and the entrance to a bullring -- was lighting designer Thomas Hase. Hase is a wizard, not only in creating atmosphere, but in carving out spell-binding images and tableaux. The predominantly red-orange colors of the final act, for instance, with flags waving and confetti flying as Escamillo and Carmen entered the square, were offset by the blinding whites that encircled the two principals during their fateful encounter.

Conductor Andreas Delfs led the Cincinnati Symphony Orchestra effectively, though to this listener, his tempos in the Overture and Prelude to Act IV were so rapid as to give the music a tossed-off quality. The Prelude to act III, a quiet moment featuring flute and harp, was quite lovely, and save for an uneasy moment now and then, ensemble between the stage and pit was excellent.

If you've seen "Carmen" more times than you can count, here's one you will nevertheless not want to miss.

Repeats are 7:30 p.m. Thursday (July 24) and 3 p.m. Sunday (July 26) at Music Hall. Call (513) 241-2742, or order online at www.cincinnatiopera.org as tickets are likely to go fast.