

SAN DIEGO STORY

Dream Cast Soars in San Diego Opera's Stunning Mozart Production



[Ken Herman](#) Feb 15, 2015



Idlebrando D’Arcangelo & Myrto Papatnasiu [photo (c) Cory Weaver]

Beethoven dismissed the theme of Mozart’s *Don Giovanni* as too frivolous for consideration, but philosophers and theologians have treated the opera as a treasure only a step removed from Divine revelation. San Diego Opera’s stunning production of *Don Giovanni* that opened Saturday (Feb. 14) at Civic Theatre not only made an air-tight case for the opera’s dramatic potency, but offered a roster of accomplished singers who gave Mozart’s richest score its due and then some.

Complementing this assembled vocal prowess, Nicholas Muni’s insightful direction and sleek production design clarified the work’s labyrinthian plot in ways that proved helpful even to *Don Giovanni* aficionados. Muni moved the dramatic action as swiftly as Mozart’s effervescent orchestral score prodded his vocal lines, and even the second act—whose pace rarely exceeds glacial—took on a welcome air of urgency.

It is hardly surprising that Italian bass-baritone Idlebrando D’Arcangelo has made the title role his calling card. His virile, bouyant vocal technique and dashing figure fit Don Giovanni like a hand-stitched leather glove. Without resorting to simulated bravado, he exuded the uncanny self-confidence the noble rake requires. Although his seductive aria “Deh vieni alla finestra” and equally

persuasive duet “Là ci darem la mano” each radiated suave allure, his final encounter with the otherworldly statue brought out just the right amount of vocal brawn.

Over the last few seasons Egyptian bass-baritone Ashraf Sewailam has become a familiar singer with



Ashraf Sewailam & Myrto Papatnasiu [photo (c) Cory Weaver]

the San Diego company; he sang a fine Count Horn in last year’s best production, Verdi’s *A Masked Ball*. His adrenalized Leporello proved an excellent foil to D’Arcangelo’s cool Don Giovanni, and although his bass-baritone sounded a bit less focused—and a bit more dusky in color—than his Master’s, his agility and vigor more than compensated. And in Leporello’s trademark “Catalogue” Aria, in which are enumerated the Don’s amorous conquests country by country, Sewailam neatly balanced solicitude and braggadocio.

Soprano Myrto Papatnasiu’s Donna Elvira, the jilted love interest to whom the “Catalogue” Aria is sung, blended indignation with besotted despair, an apt emotional cocktail for her character, and her colorful soprano proved equal to the robust vocal standards of the rest of the cast. Since soprano Ellie Dehn made her company debut as Mimi in 2010, her voice has developed more depth and point, while her reliable gleaming upper register gave the strength and nobility Donna Anna requires. I was touched by her poignant second act aria “Non mi dir.”

Because the Prague opera company that commissioned *Don Giovanni* had only one lead tenor it



Ellie Dehn & Paul Appleby [photo (c) Cary Weaver]

could count on, Mozart gave his opera's sole tenor role to Don Ottavio, Donna Anna's intended. The young American tenor Paul Appleby made his Ottavio unusually sympathetic in his ministrations to Donna Anna, and his bright, well-placed lyric tenor commanded not only his big show-off aria "Il mio tesoro," but even the slightest scrap of recitative.

The story's peasant couple, mezzo-soprano Emily Fons as Zerlina and bass-baritone Kristopher Irmiter as Masetto, was well-matched vocally and temperamentally. Of course, Mozart gave all the memorable tunes to Zerlina, and Fons' fresh, shimmering mezzo made the most of Mozart's bounty, especially her aria used to comfort Masetto "Vedrai, carino." German bass Reinhard Hagen brought a touch of Wagnerian rigor to the Commendatore, and his well-modulated, stentorian declamations confronted Don Giovanni at the drama's eerie climax. Perhaps the cast's greatest achievements were its ability to infuse every ensemble with dramatic vitality and execute stylish phrasing together effortlessly.



Scene from San Diego Opera's "Don Giovanni" [photo (c) Cory Weaver]

With walls that quickly slid into place and furnishings temporarily concealed with drop cloths that could be removed in a moment, Muni's unit set—a massive kaleidoscopic abstraction—easily suggested locations such as a street scene, a ballroom, or a cemetery. His raked stage was filled with trap doors out of which necessary props were easily retrieved and through which characters made discreet exits. **Scene changes were executed with rapid changes in Thomas C. Hase's darkish lighting scheme, although occasional flashes of bright light or lurid color telegraphed an unexpected turn of events.**

The set and costume materials suggested the late 18th century in color and texture, but their minimalist surroundings had the air of 20th-century Surrealism. And the vivid hues of David Burdick's eclectic costumes continually delighted the eye.



Kristopher Irmiter, Emily Fons & Idlebrando D'Arcangelo [photo (c) Cory Weaver]

Conductor Daniele Callegari's tempos were spirited but not rushed, although I thought his dynamic levels could have been stronger, especially in the ensemble and chorus scenes. Although the opera chorus did not have a large role in this opera, their big ensemble scene with three different dances occurring at once came off like clockwork, with the unmistakable suggestion of mayhem about to break loose. And I cannot stop recalling Sewailam's Leporello bullishly strong-arming Irmiter's Masetto into learning a dance step to distract the poor fellow while Don Giovanni charmed his recent bride Zerlina on the other side of the stage.

Last year after San Diego Opera miraculously recovered from former General Director Ian Campbell's demolition derby, observers frequently employed the image of a phoenix rising from the ashes. With the successes of the first two operas of the company's current mainstage opera season, the phoenix is *not* rising.

It is soaring.

This production of Mozart's "Don Giovanni" was seen at the San Diego Civic Theatre on February 14 at 7:00 p.m. It will be repeated at that hour on February 17 & 20, with a 2:00 p.m. matinee on Sunday, February 22, 2015.