

Verdi's Luisa not betrayed

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JOHN TERAUDS
CLASSICAL MUSIC CRITIC
Luisa Miller

★★★★ (out of 4)

By Giuseppe Verdi. Canadian Opera Company. Directed by Jose Maria Condemni. Conducted by Richard Bradshaw. To May 11 at the Four Seasons Centre for the Performing Arts, 145 Queen St. W. 416-363-8231.

One of the great pleasures in attending a performance at the Four Seasons Centre for the Performing Arts is savouring the clarity of the sound.

To that pleasure last night was added the joy of a clear operatic production, where the director, conductor, singers and design all work toward a common purpose: telling a good story. It was the opening of *Luisa Miller*, one of the early operas by Italy's most venerated 19th-century composer, Giuseppe Verdi.

Ten years have gone by since the Canadian Opera Company has presented this tragic tale of love betrayed, and it's hard to imagine the organization presenting it better than in this tidy, sturdy production borrowed from the Teatro di San Carlo in Naples, Italy – the theatre where the opera had its premiere on December 8, 1849.

The orchestra, led by COC general director Richard Bradshaw, was a model of clarity, showcasing Verdi's buoyant musical textures (Derek Bate conducts five of the remaining nine performances). The singing cast made for a strong ensemble. There was no single star, but neither was there a voice that let us down.

Italian soprano Serena Farnocchia, no innocent lass, captures the heart-on-sleeve vulnerability of the title role. Tenor Mikhail Agafonov, as Luisa's love Rodolfo, has the true, ringing voice of a leading man. Swiss baritone Alexander Marco-Buhrmeister is convincing as Luisa's forthright father.

Basses Burak Bilgili and Phillip Ens are great bad guys – Rodolfo's father Count Walter, and Wurm, the man who has eyes for Luisa, respectively. Russian mezzo Larissa Kostyuk is solid as Federica, who has eyes for Rodolfo.

Chorus master Sandra Horst has done an excellent job in preparing the chorus, which, as is typical in Verdi's early operas, has a lot of singing to do.

The sets, by Argentinean designer Carmelo Giammello, are stark yet eye-catching, dominated by an ever-changing moody sky. It is the backdrop for the trials of two young lovers who lose their hearts and lives amidst the dues and obligations they owe and want to deny their fathers.

Thomas Hase's lighting is suitably intense, with occasional blasts of white light to highlight emotional highs. The costumes, which mix and match several centuries, ranging from late 16th to early 19th, are resplendent for everyone but Wurm, who looks like an undertaker, and the Millers. Luisa spends most of her time on stage looking as if she is wearing a shabby housecoat.

This and the presence of an unnecessary gigantic fallen crucifix on stage (to reinforce that the world has turned upside down) during the final act are two small quibbles in a memorably well-done production.