

Review: Norma | Dallas Opera | Margot and Bill Winspear Opera House

Closing this week on Sun, May 7, 2017
Next performance on Sun, May 7 at 2pm

Beauty in the Voice

The Dallas Opera closes its season with a gorgeously sung, and fantastic looking, production of Bellini's *Norma*.

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Photo: Karen Almond/The Dallas Opera

The Dallas Opera presents *Norma*

Dallas — Bellini's *Norma* is one of those legendary operas that are rarely seen but always talked about. Opera buffs can tell you about every *Norma* performance they attended and many have even traveled abroad to see it. That is why this *Norma*, produced by **The Dallas Opera**, has created so much pre-opening buzz. It certainly doesn't disappoint.

This *Norma* production has the goods: excellent singing by the entire cast, the performers of which create realistic dramatic tension, a rustic set that frames the action but doesn't get in the way, vivid lighting effects and topped off with superb conducting.

The main reason that *Norma* is so difficult to put on the stage is that it demands singers who are masters of the Bel Canto style of singing.

Bel Canto (“beautiful singing”) refers to the singing technique prevalent in the 18th and early 19th century, but they didn’t call it that at the time. The term was created in the mid-19th century to describe a longing for a style of singing that was lost. A revival of Bel Canto, and the operas written in that era, had a reawakening when conductor and pianist Richard Bonyngue thought that the style was better suited to his wife’s voice, soprano Joan Sutherland, than her appearances in Wagner operas. His suggestion was exactly right. Not only did she succeed, but the pair brought the entire Bel Canto repertoire back to the stage.

The role of Norma requires a rare bird indeed—a dramatic coloratura soprano, meaning one who has Wagnerian heft and endurance combined with impeccable coloratura skills. TDO has just such a singer, the South African soprano Elza van den Heever. She triumphs in that demanding role in TDO’s glorious production at the Winspear Opera House.

Van den Heever started out as a mezzo and that darker quality is apparent in her current voice. As Norma, she demonstrates a mastery of the requirements for a perfect Bel Canto performance: evenness of range from top to bottom, clean coloratura work, the use of the *messa di voce* (a gradual crescendo followed by a matching diminuendo while holding a single note), great dynamic control, the ability to spin a long melody, the capability to blaze out in hot anger or quietly invoke tenderness and heartbreak, and control over her vibrato for dramatic effect.



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Her first test comes early in the opera with the famous aria “Casta Diva.” Van den Heever’s singing is divine. She does all of this while maintaining the dignity expected of a Druid Priestess.

Yes, this opera is about the Druids in Gaul, who were chafing under the Roman occupation in about 50 BCE. Norma is the High Priestess and, before the opera starts, had a forbidden affair with Pollione, the hated Roman Proconsul of Gaul. Worse, they produced two children.

The role of the dashing and virile Pollione is sung by the South Korean tenor Yonghoon Lee He, who also has a huge voice. He made his Metropolitan Opera debut in the hefty title role in Verdi’s opera *Don Carlo*. His singing is right out of the Italian Parmigianino School of Tenors. He has a big robust voice with ringing high notes. However, he pulls it back when needed for more intimate moments.

The crux of the opera is that Pollione is no longer interested in Norma but is now wooing Adalgisa, a younger Druid priestess and best friend of Norma. (His thing for Druid holy women causes all the problems.)

Adalgisa is a role that was written for a soprano, but today is often sung by a mezzo. Not so here. Music Director and Conductor Emmanuel Villaume follows the composer’s intentions and has cast two sopranos.

Marina Costa-Jackson, who was born in Las Vegas but was raised in Palermo, Italy, sings the role of Adalgisa. This Metropolitan Opera auditions winner has a résumé filled with increasingly heavy roles, from Musetta in Puccini's *La bohème* to Leonora in Verdi's *Il trovatore*. Although, unlike Van den Heever, she did not start out as a mezzo. She has a mezzo-like overlay to her voice. The advantage here is that, while both are powerful singers, it is easy to differentiate who is singing what.

The already awkward three-way situation is compounded by the fact that Norma is not only the high priestess, but is also the daughter of the Druid High Priest Oroveso. He is portrayed by the young American bass-baritone, Christian Van Horn. In this role, he sounds more like a bass than a baritone and projects an unwavering sternness that still makes Norma cower.

As expected in opera, everything goes from bad to worse. At one point, Norma raises the Druids to a fever-pitch to attack the Romans. She even threatens to kill her children but relents and asks Adalgisa to take them to their father, the perfidious Pollione, and to care for them as if they were her own.

The sticky wicket is when the Druids declare war and someone must be sacrificed. The question is "Who?" When Pollione is captured, he seems like the perfect candidate to the angry Norma. However, she relents and publicly reveals their affair as well as the progeny they produced. For her sins, it is Norma that is to be sacrificed by jumping onto a huge burning pyre. Pollione, at last realizing the error of his ways, joins her to find an everlasting love beyond the grave.

Norma is not just a big trio. There are two minor roles that are just as important to the action. TDO used two singers, worthy of the excellence of this cast. The two are companions, one for Pollione and the other for Norma. Clotilde is sung by soprano Mithra Mastropiero and Flavio portrayed by tenor Charles Karanja. The chorus, ably trained by Alexander Rom, has as big a role in the opera as any of the leads and, on Friday, gave a marvelous performance.

John Conklin's set is made up of two formidable walls of gray stone, on either side of the stage, with beams protruding at odd angles. It was hard to tell what he meant them to be, but they did enclose the action and present a barrier to escape. Projections on the back were an odd collection of disparate image such as the eclipse of the sun and the steely face of the Druid god Irminsul. In the end, a huge version of Irminsul's shield descends, accompanied by monstrous hits on a gong.

Conklin's costumes are vaguely appropriate to a non-specific ancient era, with the Roman Soldiers decked out in armor and the Druids draped in gray fabric. The static nature of this opera, just a series of encounters, makes the director's job difficult, but director Nic Muni keeps the stage picture involving without everyone running all over the place. **Lighting director Thomas C. Hase creates some marvelous effects, from a sunrise to drenching the stage in red to suggest rivers of blood.**

But no matter how wonderful a cast you have, the success of the opera lays directly at the feet of the conductor. On Friday, Emmanuel Villaume was a study in controlled energy as he propelled the opera forward to its dramatic conclusion, while managing to never let the tempo run ahead or rush. He was right with the singers and on top of the text all the way, while still allowing them the room to be expressive. The balance between the stage and the pit was always correct yet he stirred up excitingly loud climaxes.

But the most admirable thing about his performance is that he kept some ammunition in reserve for the biggest moment, the apotheosis of the score, at the very end—and then, only on the second time we heard it. This one seemingly small thing brought the opera to an explosive ending that so thrilled the audience that we had a spontaneous standing ovation. **TJ**