

# Elektra packs a jolt

Apr 23, 2007 04:30 AM

JOHN TERAUDS  
CLASSICAL MUSIC CRITIC

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Elektra

★★★★ (out of 4)

By Richard Strauss. Directed by Thomas de Mallet Burgess. Conducted by Richard Bradshaw. To May 19 at the Four Seasons Centre for the Performing Arts, 145 Queen St. W. 416-363-8231

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When we think of opera, most of us think voice. But a live show is a blend of sound, light, movement and storytelling. It's rare for all four elements to meet as equals. When they do, the aesthetic wallop is stronger than any chemical high.

Such is the case with the Canadian Opera Company's revival production of the 1909 Richard Strauss opera *Elektra*, which opened at the Four Seasons Centre for the Performing Arts on Saturday night.

The singing, acting, direction, design and orchestral accompaniment were of such high calibre and force that it is hard to imagine a more consistently good production.

Not that there weren't a couple of little problems. Nor is this a cheerful night on the town. In an unbroken 1 3/4 hours, Strauss's music and Hugo von Hofmannsthal's libretto drag us from the depths of despair to the heights of rapture. It is an exhausting journey that, travelled in the right company, leaves an indelible mark on the psyche.

COC general director Richard Bradshaw brings the multi-hued score to brilliant, clear life. You can feel the dips and swells in the orchestration in your gut. By the end, you don't want the music to stop, so magnetic is its presence in the hall.

*Elektra's* three main women were magnificent.

The title role is a killer. She is onstage the whole time and has to vocalize a half-crazed creature maimed by grief and consumed by revenge.

Strauss's challenge was met head-on by British dramatic soprano Susan Bullock, a wonderful Brünhilde in last fall's production of Wagner's *Ring Cycle*. As Elektra, she touched the depths of our souls with her plaintive pleas.

Polish contralto Ewa Podles captured the not-quite-spent hurricane force that is Elektra's mother Klytamnestra, who, with lover Aegisth, killed her husband Agamemnon, banished son Orest to exile, terrorized her two daughters and decimated the regal household.

British soprano Alwyn Mellor gave Elektra's hapless sister Chrysothemis more heft than usual, to good effect.

The men have small roles, which is just as well. Orest was sung by American baritone Daniel Sutin, whose voice lacked vocal heft – and some of the lowest notes. More disappointing was Canadian tenor John Mac Master as Aegisth, whose voice was neither steady nor strong (the role is sung by Alan Woodrow in two upcoming performances).

There were no jarring moves in Thomas de Mallet Burgess's direction. Derek McLane's set, all wacky tilted planes and crazed angles, *was brilliantly lit in garish hues by Thomas C. Hase*. Anita Stewart's mix-and-match costumes tended toward the grotesque, suiting the mad, mad world that is Elektra's lot.

Not seen in Toronto since 1996, this is a brilliant effort.