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Seattle Opera's 'Rigoletto' shows passion for the music

By Maggie Larrick
Columnist



Marco Vratogna as Rigoletto in Seattle Opera's 2014 production, which opened at McCaw Hall on Jan. 11. Photo by Elise Bakketun

Director Linda Brovsky's 2004 transposition for Seattle Opera of Verdi's "Rigoletto" from Italy's 16th century to its Fascist 1930s has aged beautifully. Last Saturday's opening performance of "Rigoletto" s current Seattle Opera run earned a justifiably rousing standing ovation.

The shift in time period provides a more immediately recognizable framework than the opera's original Mantuan Court roots. Just as in Mantua, however, the corrupt power elite of Fascist Italy could do pretty much as it pleased, and the working class suffered the often-horrific consequences.

The tragedy of Verdi's opera is set in motion when a servant, the hunchback jester Rigoletto, offends a member of the power structure, Count Ceprano, who retaliates by kidnapping Rigoletto's beloved daughter, Gilda.

We are carried along by the implausible plotline of Verdi's tragedy of love and sacrifice only through Brovsky and her cast's detailed characters and passion-driven staging. Even the singers in the Seattle Opera Chorus behave like fully three-dimensional characters.

Of course, part of the production's success rests on Verdi's beloved music, so well-known that most neophytes have heard Rigoletto's inescapable aria "La donna è mobile," performed by everyone from cartoon character Bugs Bunny to famed opera singer Luciano Pavarotti.

Conductor Riccardo Frizza and the orchestra deftly supported the cast, effortlessly sailing through the score's rapid changes of mood. Under Frizza's direction, the chorus did likewise.

Powerful voices

Baritone Marco Vratogna's Rigoletto seemed far more resigned and less bitter than the usual Rigoletto over the way life has treated him. Yet, that and his gorgeous and touching duets with his daughter make him surprisingly sympathetic. While Vratogna's emotional intensity ramped up nicely during the opera, he also wasn't as distraught as I expected over his daughter's death, a scene that could have been devastating instead of just sad.

In her Seattle Opera debut, Nadine Sierra perfectly embodies Rigoletto's innocent daughter, Gilda. On opening night, Sierra displayed a soaring, crystalline soprano, effortlessly swirling up and down through Verdi's coloratura, most impressively while lying on her back during her aria "Cara Nome." My favorite moments were Sierra's duets with Vratogna, glowing with her love for her father. This is an up-and-coming performer to keep your eye on.

As the licentious Duke of Mantua, tenor Francesco Demuro's rounded and open voice flowed with powerful ease over the most stratospheric notes, including the high B natural in "La donna è mobile." Rightfully, Demuro drew his biggest applause for the moving Act 2 double aria, in which he declares he is falling in love with Gilda and she makes him want to be a better man. This Duke really does seem to fall for Gilda, so his subsequent betrayal of her with Maddalena is confusing.

In the role of the assassin Sparafucile, Andrea Silvestrelli's bass rumbles as ominously through your soul as his menacing presences. As Sparafucile's sister, Maddalena, Sarah Larsen was a curvaceous and confident siren, luring men irresistibly to destruction.

Updated for modern audiences

Built for Seattle Opera's 1988 "Rigoletto," Robert Dahlstrom's set was updated to the 20th century for the 2004 production, by adding period posters, electric lights and furniture such as a billiards table.

Thomas C. Hase's shadowy lighting magnifies the opera's treacherous political landscape.

Marie Anne Chiment's costumes — from glamorously figure-hugging evening gowns to Fascist uniforms — adroitly play up the opera's leitmotifs of sexuality and power.

The wonderful music, passion and awe-inspiring vocal pyrotechnics make this a most gratifying night of opera, despite the harrowing story

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Continuing Story:

Seattle Opera's "Rigoletto" plays at Marion Oliver McCaw Hall (321 Mercer St.), through Saturday, Jan. 25. For ticket information, visit www.seattleopera.org.

MAGGIE LARRICK is a former editor of the Queen Anne & Magnolia News. To comment on this review, write to QAMagNews@nwlinc.com.



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