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OPERA REVIEW: Regardless of its absurd, impenetrable libretto, "Il Trovatore" melodies prove a source of delight

by Mort Levine

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Opera San Jose is initiating its homage to Guiseppe Verdi's 200th birthday this year with a pair of his masterworks. The company last weekend opened with "Il Trovatore" and will conclude next September with "Falstaff." The first of these operas proved to have a libretto, which is just as difficult to follow as it was when the first curtain came down in 1853 in Rome. But the audience still finds the music and singing enthralling.

"Il Trovatore" will go forth five more times this season on Feb. 16, 17 (at 3 p.m.), 19, 22 and 24 (3 p.m.). Other than the two Sunday matinees, all shows are at 8 p.m. It is running at the California Theatre in downtown San Jose.

Finding four very strong voices would strain the best companies but Opera San Jose, which has an outstanding resident training program for young talents, uses two casts, thus making the challenge even greater.

Surprisingly, the four principals we heard on Sunday afternoon proved up to the task, especially in the 14 dazzling arias, duets and chorus numbers.

Most famous of these is the Anvil Chorus, which has been spoofed by the Marx Brothers ("A Night at the Opera") and Gilbert and Sullivan ("Pinafore"). It does invite kidding with its unbelievable narrative of a gypsy who throws the wrong baby into the fire. This winds up with the rival lovers being brothers and not knowing it. After the nasty brother has killed his sibling, the gypsy tells him what he's done, for the opera's gruesome climax. Shortly before

Leonora has taken a slow acting poison after promising to give herself to the hated Count DeLuna in exchange for Manrico's freedom. So she's already dead in the stage when the tenor gets his.

The cast we heard had dramatic soprano Melody King as Leonora and tenor James Callon sang Manrico, beloved by Leonora. The evil baritone role was sung by Evan Brummel. The fourth key player, a wizened Gypsy, Azucena, was performed by Rebecca Krouner, a young mezzo soprano, an affiliated artist with Opera San Jose. The others are resident artists.

The opera musically has aspects of the lush bel canto era of Donizetti, Bellini and Rossini, but it explores the more romantic idiom Verdi is moving toward.

The opera is conducted by Opera San Jose Musical Director David Rohrbaugh with his usual great sensitivity for the singers. Direction is by Brad Dalton, who has done superb work with Anna Karenina and Idomeneo.

However, this production was more of a "stand and deliver" static arrangement that seemed to minimize the drama. Steven Kemp's sets were functional but little more and Elizabeth Poindexter's costumes were likewise.

Among others in the cast who performed well were Matthew Anchel, in the baritone role of Ferrando, the count's aide, and Tori Grayum who sang Inez, Leonora's lady-in-waiting.

Performing in the other cast are Cecilia Violetta Lopez as Leonora, Alexander Boyer, Manrico, Zachary Altman as Count DiLuna and Nicole Birkland as Azucena.

The audience appeared to favor Azucena as sung by Krouner. At the curtain calls they rose to their feet cheering when she took her bow. Verdi himself thought the opera might really be named after the gypsy woman.

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