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'Lucia di Lammermoor' opens Opera San Jose season



lucia

Kirk Dougherty sang the role of Edgardo to Sylvia Lee's transcendent Lucia in Opera San Jose's production of Donizetti's "Lucia di Lammermoor." PAT KIRK

By **ELIJAH HO**

September 13, 2016 at 12:23 pm

"Vehicles of vocalism and nothing else". Those are the words of Virgil Thomson, critic extraordinaire of the 20th century, used to describe for posterity the works of Gaetano Donizetti.

Saturday evening at the California Theater, Opera San Jose opened their 33rd season with Donizetti's masterpiece, "Lucia di Lammermoor".

For all of its vocal splendor, the work is one of the most overproduced in the operatic repertory. To use Thomson's word, "vehicles", "Lucia di Lammermoor" is not unlike the city bus or the train: miss it, and you're likely to catch the next one before long. And given "Lucia's" extraordinary history with names like Melba, Callas and Sutherland, you're not likely to write home about anything out of the ordinary.

But this is where it gets interesting. On Saturday, the cast and crew of Opera San Jose offered this particular well-worn vehicle of vocalism. But they also delivered much more than that.

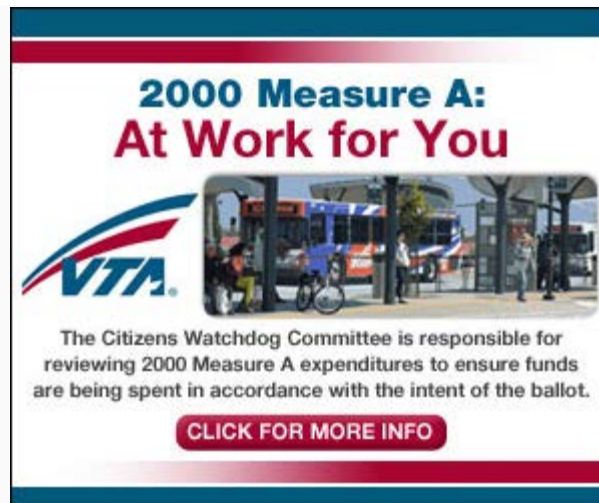
To put it bluntly, it was a thing well-conceived and brilliantly executed.

By the time she had sung her final notes as Lucia on Saturday evening, it was apparent soprano Sylvia Lee had left us with something special.

The singing actor, a winner of the 2007 Metropolitan Opera National Council Auditions, conveyed meaning seamlessly throughout the evening. We marveled at how she handled the delicate cantilena of "Regnava nel silenzio", the way she took the delicate roulades in "Quando, rapito in estasi" with ease and elegance. When she was in her element, there was incredible evenness of tone. Pitches, no matter the distance, were hit squarely in the middle, and her legato flowed the Mozart-prescribed way: "like oil".

Lucia's mental collapse, culminating in the much-anticipated mad scene, was both subtle and gradual. Lee's facial expressions, beginning with wide, crazy eyes, evolved from "Il pallor funesto" to "Soffriva nel pianto". By the end, I couldn't help but be disturbed by the contrast between her blood-soaked white dress, the forlorn, exhausted expressions of her face and the emanating beauty of her coloratura in response to the flute.

The dispute between Enrico and Edgardo also raged on in captivating performances by baritone Matthew Hanscom and tenor Kirk Dougherty. The resident singers have faced off in numerous roles, and their evolution was breathtaking to experience. The booming, towering Hanscom portrayed the more determined, egotistical Enrico to a T. But it was Dougherty, wearing his heart on his sleeve, who brought the house down with closing statements "Fra poco a me ricovero" and "Tu che a Dio spiegasti l'ali" – a testament to his vocal technique and dependable stamina.



Conductor Ming Luke set the tone with well-balanced voicing, and both bass Colin Ramsey and mezzo Anna Yelizarova impressed vocally in convincing portrayals of Raimondo and Alisa. The sextet, arguably one of the most celebrated of operatic ensembles, was delivered so spectacularly, with voices climaxing to match the drums and brass, one could conceive that casting was based primarily on that number alone.

There is no doubt Donizetti was prolific. The man produced 31 operas over 12 years, and even once conveyed to a friend, "I leave it to you whether the author would toss anything off" after completing an opera in just 11 days.

Whether you side with Thomson or the composer, what remains in mind long after Saturday's performance is the beauty that comes with evolution. There is something incredible about the cohesion of a devoted group that works together for years at a time: Their chemistry and the blossoming of talent is inevitable.

Get in your car, or take the bus or the train. There is magnificent vocalism and so much more.

OPERA SAN JOSE

Presents Gaetano Donizetti's "Lucia di Lammermoor"

Where: California Theatre, 345 South 1st St., San Jose

When: Through Sept. 25

Tickets: \$56-\$176; 408-437-4450, www.operasj.org



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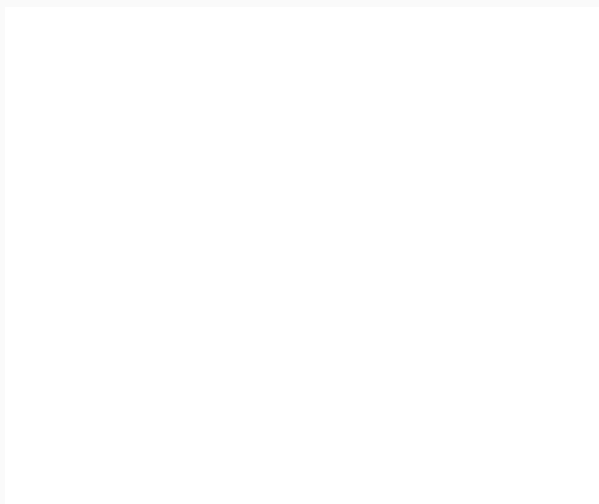
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