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Da Corneto's 'Aida' captures subtle shadings and rich overtones

June 26, 2008 ↑ Recommend (2)

BY LAURA EMERICK lemerick@suntimes.com

Sound the triumphal march for da Corneto Opera; with its compelling production of Verdi's "Aida," the resourceful company has returned victorious once again.

Now in its 12th year, da Corneto specializes in concert versions of large-scale operas, some previously unheard here for decades. Founded "by singers for singers," the company emphasizes the vocal art over the visual component. Under the helm of general manager Kelli Finn and artistic director Alvaro Ramirez, da Corneto has been on a roll, especially with its productions of Verdi's "La forza del destino" last year and Donizetti's "Poliuto" in 2006 (marking its first local staging in more than 135 years).

'AIDA' HIGHLY RECOMMENDED

When: 7:30 p.m. Saturday

Where: Pick-Staiger Concert Hall, 50 Arts Circle Dr., Northwestern University, Evanston

Tickets: \$35

Phone: (847) 862-2694

One of the staples of the operatic repertoire, "Aida" has never gone out of favor since its debut in 1871. Famous for its massive choruses, such as the Act 2 Triumphal March, and powerhouse arias, including "Ritorna vincitor" and "Celeste Aida," its familiarity can breed contempt. With the opera's grandiose elements of elephants, pyramids and death on the Nile, it's tempting to push pageantry at the expense of musical coherence.

Heard Sunday at the Church of St. Hilary on the North Side, da Corneto's "Aida" offered an attractive cast that made Verdi's improbable drama come alive. Though set against a backdrop of warring nations, "Aida" is more concerned with the conflicts of human emotions than the fate of empires. A concert version allows the focus to return to the psychological drama behind the spectacle, and da Corneto's cast expertly conveyed the tensions playing out in the love triangle formed by the Ethiopian slave Aida, the Egyptian princess Amneris and captain Radames, the man they both desire.

Even with da Corneto's strong vocal lineup, the production's big news is the local debut of conductor Enrique Patron de Rueda, artistic director of Mexico's La Compania Nacional de Opera (headquartered in Mexico City's historic Palacio de Bellas Artes). The conductor expertly delineated the opera's many complex shifts in tone. He excelled at shading dynamics, especially in the choral scenes. For the Act 2 ballet, which often can turn into sonic mush, he delicately drew out instrumental lines. On Sunday, this segment received a thunderous ovation that actually stopped the show. And wonder of wonders, the trumpet fanfare that opens the march "Gloria all'Egitto" was not bobbed (which usually seems to be the case at Lyric Opera).

For its three performances of "Aida," da Corneto is rotating its some of principal singers. In the lead roles, soprano Nina Edwards and tenor Daniel Snyder create a convincing portrait of the tormented slave and her warrior lover. Though Edwards fully realized the role's oversize dimensions, she occasionally sounded strained, as in the showcase aria "O patria mia." Aida of course is a killer role and some of her vocal unevenness probably resulted from back-to-back performances Saturday and Sunday. Snyder sang with ardor throughout, cresting beautifully in the final duet "O terra addio."

As Amneris, mezzo Patrice Houston displayed a laserlike brilliance, easily soaring over the massed orchestra and chorus. (Mexican mezzo Belem Rodriguez will take over the role for the last performance.) Ramirez, who also prepared the company's lush-sounding chorus, conjured up a rich, dark bass as the priest Ramfis. As the royal adversary Amonasro, baritone Tom Hall thrilled, especially in the Act 3 aria "Si, fuggimi da queste mura." (Mark Walters will assume this part Saturday.) And bass David Eickstaedt, as the King of Egypt, made every note of his supporting part count.

Though listeners might quibble over some of the individual performances, it's hard to recall a locally produced "Aida" sung with more passion and spirit. With Lyric closed for the summer, da Corneto provides a much-needed opera fix.



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