

LYRIC OPERA

KANSAS CITY

LA TRAVIATA

BY GIUSEPPE VERDI | SEPTEMBER 26, OCTOBER 1, 3, 5, 2014

“SEMPRE LIBERA” AND ALWAYS DELIGHTFUL

September 29, 2014

By Sarah Tyrrell



David Gately directed the Lyric Opera production of *La traviata* with a focus on peripheral personal connections that exist among a web of relationships relevant to the heroine. As a wealthy, sought-after courtesan, Violetta is of course interesting, but add some fierce conflict against moral dilemmas and an audience better sympathizes with her character's private struggles. Joyce El-Khoury fit most opera-goers' vision of Violetta—she is stunning, elegant, and vocally she was unmatched in this cast. The soprano has an impressive flexibility, examples of which she doled out generously, teasing out a lyrical line past its prime here and there just to extend a dramatic moment (and maybe to show off just a little).

El-Khoury's Violetta captivated this appreciative audience, who graciously disregarded that she seemed not quite ready for the coloratura passages embedded in the early duet “Un di, felice, eterea.” In fact, Violetta's act-one triumph was “Ah, fors'è lui” (rather than the expected “Sempre libera,” where El-Khoury's twirling and scampering was just too affected to really enhance the vocal acrobats). In the pensive monologue where Violetta wonders if Alfredo could be “the one,” she exhibited grace and control across a mind-blowing range. No other number compared to the indulgent melodic lines and exquisite pauses that played out here, but Act 3's “Addio, del passato bei sogni ridenti” was a close second, so perfectly tragic with a disciplined and dampened orchestra echoing her reminiscences. The resolve that Verdi and Piave collaborated to create for Violetta in Act 2 meant a turning point for El-Khoury. It was here, in interactions with her lover's father, that she won sympathy for Violetta, and that delay, a smart directing decision, made for a compelling shift in how this story typically unfolds. Her performance of “Dite alla giovine sì bella e pura” confirmed that El-Khoury was even better in heartbreak than in the revelry of love.

Scott Quinn pulled his weight as Alfredo, but revealed himself as a vocal equal to El-Khoury only in the deathbed scene, where the clear, lyric timbre for which he is known was indeed lustrous. Quinn was also effective in sorrowful or angry situations, where his voice projected better, his movements showed more sharply, and his expressions (vocal and facial) were more convincing. Alfredo's opening, “Libiamo ne' lieti calici,” showed Quinn as too subtle for the moment: the orchestral dynamic was too much competition and he was muddled. Together in “Un dì, felice,” the soon-to-be lovers made more of a credible impact—critical since musical themes from the number recur as reminiscent motives—and there was a dramatic honesty between Quinn and El-Khoury. When all was said and done, Quinn played the dashing suitor well enough, and at times was positively masterful with recitative; he will no doubt evolve into this role over time and opportunity.

Anthony Michaels-Moore was a strong paternal presence as Giorgio Germont. Although covered and muffled at times, his reliable baritone met head on the fuller orchestral moments and lent Germont a necessary power and presence as he imparted weighty consequences to Alfredo and Violetta. In Act 3, however, Michaels-Moore fell behind the accompaniment and his lines seemed labored; overall his acting was stiff, his movements stilted and disengaged. Still, Germont's confrontations with Violetta enabled El-Khoury to better develop the multi-dimensional courtesan.

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The orchestra was in fine form, commendably adaptive to singers' whims. It was surely no easy task to shadow the sustained lines and delicacy of El-Khoury's delivery, which at times almost derailed vocal/instrumental alignment. Recovery was always admirable and professional, but dynamic levels could be adjusted for solo and dialogue recitative segments, in particular Alfredo's and Violetta's Act 1 interaction, as well as to correct that Quinn was completely lost in his final lines of "De' miei bollenti spiriti /Il giovanile ardore." The initial overture shimmered with haunting premonitions, where Ward Holmquist expertly added necessary foreboding to the dainty dance music via some extreme dynamic contrasts, extra emphasis on ominous chords, and a leisurely lingering on descending melodic lines. Holmquist's artistic treatment of this introductory music was imaginative and effective.

Verdi made full-textured and "layered" ensemble writing a habit, often restricting an individual character to personal musing even as he or she sings simultaneously with others. Every singer, including lesser roles sung by Ashley Wheat (Annina), Tyler Simpson (Dotter Grenvil), and Clark Weyrauch (Gastone) managed well the composer's penchant to expertly isolate characters, allowing them (forcing them?) to revel in (wallow in?) their own emotions. And as Barone Douphol, Robert McNichols, Jr. put his resonant bass to good use and was unfailingly menacing throughout. Via inventive lighting, Kendall Smith added visual support for Verdi's musical and dramatic emphases. In particular, a shadows-versus-sunlight dichotomy created the perfect, palpable tension for Violetta's final moments, where appropriate shading exploited each character's personal suffering and accentuated musical independence.

The audience marveled at Desmond Heeley's visual artistry, spontaneously applauding an empty stage as the curtain rose for Act 2 and offering audible gasps when Flora's lavish party set was revealed. The settings shifted from opulent to stark, and the colors from vibrant to muted, to deftly transfer the audience from salon to garden to bedroom, as well as to convey the characters across the narrative stages.

While Verdi's choral writing would never be deemed the most sophisticated of the repertory, this capable ensemble fortified tonight's production. The chorus worked its magic across all sorts of dramatic requirements, from boisterous parties to compassionate sympathizers, with singers always smartly placed and spaced to enhance dramatic focus. Their closed numbers tightened the action and balanced soloistic sprawl. The exoticism and flair of visiting gypsies were fantastic, and the Kansas City audience went wild for the diversion. Mesmerizing costumes, Devon Carney's inventive choreography, plus the physicality of matadors was indeed exciting.