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'Aida' star's stamina enviable but intimacy lacking

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Verdi's "Aida" is many operas in one. Even for scholars, critics and performers, it's the opera remembered from childhood. (Did we really see it with elephants?)

It's grand opera with the "Triumphal March," dancers, Egyptian soldiers and Ethiopian captives. It's dramatic opera with loyalties of love vs. country. And it is, despite all of the trappings, intimate chamber opera — heartrending solos and duets with spare instrumentation as two lovers wrestle with the pull of a father and a princess against the commands of their hearts.

All of these account for its enduring popularity (the work turned 140 on Christmas Eve) and allow for a good fit with traditional presentations. (Lyric Opera of Chicago now is presenting its fifth outing for the Nicolas Joel/Pet Halmen production created for Luciano Pavarotti in 1983.) Even when it's done only adequately, audiences take away a certain satisfaction from the doom-laden tale of the captive slave loved by a prince who does not know she is the daughter of his enemy. And its 3½-hour length with two half-hour intermissions allows for the audience meeting, greeting and exchange of reactions that represent a night at the opera for many.

Saturday night's opening of the run of the first of two "Aida" casts (a second set of the five principals takes over for March) offered vocal and dramatic results above adequate if not pyramid-shaking. Italian conductor Renato Palumbo is of the younger generations that have benefitted from Riccardo Muti's sweeping away of performance exaggerations and accretions to Verdi's exquisitely created scores. He and the excellent Lyric Orchestra played the score eloquently and with much inner drama. Stage director Matthew Lata, remounting the Joel/Halmen conception for the third time here, gets the balance between pomp and the crowds and the personal dilemmas of the protagonists.

Recalling casts even solely from Lyric's own history with the piece is not fair to today's Verdi singers and to the admirable job Lyric has done in recruiting two casts committed to this repertoire and its vocal demands. For many, Chicago area native soprano Sondra Radvanovsky, taking up the title role at Lyric for the first time, is the great hope for Verdi today. I have found her at her best in lesser-known works such as the Metropolitan Opera's recent revival of the mid-period "Stiffelio" or Lyric's 2009 offering of the early "Ernani." Her technique and stamina are enviable, but in works we know better, a certain one-size-fits-all sound does not allow for the personal and intimate characterization necessary for a Verdi heroine. Nor did her acting or singing ever say "Aida." The opening-night audience rewarded her richly at evening's end.

Sicilian tenor Marcello Giordani holds his own throughout the impossibly demanding part of Radames, and whether they always connect in the first three acts, he and Radvanovsky offer the proper, shared delicacy in the Tomb Scene finale. American Jill Grove seems to have become Lyric's house mezzo and this has been a very good thing, even if her nuanced, jealous princess Amneris does not quite match her successes or depth in the Austro-German repertoire. American baritone Gordon Hawkins, an impressive Porgy at Lyric, holds the stage as Aida's captive father Amonasro. American bass Raymond Aceto is a solid Ramfis, the high priest. Ryan Center second-year bass Evan Boyer has a lovely voice not quite powerful enough for the King of Egypt in the cavernous Civic Opera House. First-year Ryan mezzo Cecelia Hall was a lyrical offstage priestess. Michael Black's chorus, Kenneth von Heidecke's principal dancers, Eric Weimer's onstage trumpets and Jason Brown's lighting all animate the space and time. Alas, there are no elephants.

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