

THE AUSTRALIAN

Rigoletto's conductor hits all the right notes

MURRAY BLACK THE AUSTRALIAN JUNE 30, 2014 12:00AM



David Corcoran as Borsa, Luke Gabbedy as Marullo, Giorgio Caoduro as Rigoletto and Samuel Dundas as Ceprano in Opera Australia's Rigoletto. Source: Supplied

ITALIAN conductor Renato Palumbo has established an enviable reputation as a Verdi interpreter. After listening to his account of Rigoletto, I understand why.

One of the sources of his success was his scrupulous observation of Wagner's injunction that the conductor's most important job is setting the right tempos.

But as Furtwangler noted, a conductor should be more than just a timekeeper. Palumbo's subtly controlled use of tempo and dynamic contrasts created sinuously shaped and highly expressive musical lines.

Palumbo and his players also sustained clear textures and nuanced colours, reminding us that Verdi was a consummate orchestrator. Whatever the mood required, the orchestra's vivid, well-blended sounds ensured it was ideally realised.

Palumbo and the orchestra's stylish, sensitive accompaniment was the first of three key ingredients that made this version of Rigoletto such an outstanding achievement. The second was a superb cast headed by Italian baritone Giorgio Caoduro's magnificent Rigoletto. Firm and clear-voiced from the start, Caoduro sustained resounding strength and evenness of tone across his tessitura. His characterisation of the role was even finer than his near-flawless singing; he inhabited the role.

Physically misshapen and often malicious, Rigoletto is a hard character to like. Caoduro captured his character's complex motivations and changing emotions, demanding our

sympathy. His harrowing, utterly compelling portrayal was one of Opera Australia's most memorable performances of recent years.

The singing of soprano Emma Matthews (Gilda) and tenor Gianluca Terranova (Duke of Mantua) was also notable for its timbral variety. Initially light-voiced and pure-toned, Matthews' timbre developed weight and colour as her character endured hard lessons. Her coloratura passages were exceptional displays of technical brilliance in the service of expressive intensity. Although his acting seemed a little wooden alongside Caoduro and Matthews, Terranova's Duke still vocally convinced as ardent lover and boastful libertine.

The other successful ingredient was director Roger Hodgman's new production, returning the opera to its 16th-century context. The understated direction, uncluttered yet imposing sets, brightly contrasting costumes and swiftly executed scene changes kept the focus on the action while simultaneously sustaining the dramatic flow.

Tickets: \$69-\$295. Bookings: (02) 9318 8200. Duration: 2hr 30min, including interval. Until August 24.

Originally published as **Rigoletto hits all the right notes**

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