

Giuseppe Verdi – Il Trovatore (Met 1987)

Written by bluesever

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1. Part I 2. Part II Manrico.....Luciano Pavarotti Leonora.....Joan Sutherland
[Last performance] Count Di Luna.....Leo Nucci Azucena.....Shirley Verrett
Ferrando.....Franco De Grandis Ines.....Jean Kraft Ruiz.....Mark (W.)
Baker Messenger.....Stephen O'Mara Gypsy.....Ray Morrison
Conductor.....Richard Bonyngue Metropolitan Opera House December 19, 1987 Matinee
Broadcast

NORMALLY it takes a new opera production years to decline to the point of terminal weariness and ineptitude, but the Metropolitan Opera's "Trovatore" reached that sad state in one evening, at last night's premiere. Placing the blame precisely is not easy, simply because there is so much blame to go around. However, let us start with Richard Bonyngue, who conducted lifelessly, apparently concerned with little more than keeping the orchestra down. That expedient did allow the famous voice of Joan Sutherland, his wife and the evening's Leonora, to be clearly heard. Unfortunately, it also helped drain most of the vitality from a Verdian score that must either overflow with the stuff or fall embarrassingly flat.

The production, in its numbingly slack opening-night form, did manage to arouse some enthusiasm in Luciano Pavarotti fans eager to hear his Manrico. They were apparently happy to put up with an evening of strained and absentminded vocalism to hear him crown "Di quella pira" with the high C that tradition sanctions but that Verdi somehow neglected to write. There were far more moments of fleeting but genuine pleasure for faithful Sutherland followers who had come to pay what could well be their final respects to one of opera history's great voices.

Certainly the Australian diva deserves a respect that this production did not afford. Although the voice now sounds wan and attenuated, what Miss Sutherland can still do with it at age 61 is the stuff of opera legend. The flexibility and tonal beauty, particularly in light, high passages, is

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remarkable. Notes are often attacked too carefully for any dramatic good, and the fabled top is no longer rock- steady. But by the time she arrived at the "Miserere" she was putting it all together vocally and the years were falling away - at any rate for listeners old enough to remember her when. Miss Sutherland's deft handling of "D'amor sull'ali rosee" in the same scene provided more than a souvenir for diva collectors; it was elegant vocalism many a young soprano might learn from.

Where did we go from there, however? Nowhere but down. Though Fabrizio Melano was listed as the producer of this "Il Trovatore," the idea that anyone actually directed the solo singers or the chorus strained belief. At one moment the staging had soldiers literally going around in circles with no evident motive. In a similarly mysterious maneuver, a squad of soldiers was racked up and formed into a triangle like so many billiard balls.

Ezio Frigerio's economical but banal sets consisted mostly of six groups of marbleized pillars that moved about for reasons known perhaps only to the designer. The long flights of black stairways, which would have made sense in the massacre scene of "I Vespri Siciliani," served little purpose here but to force singers to totter up and down them perilously.

After Miss Sutherland and Mr. Pavarotti, the artists for whom this production was created, the cast fell off drastically. Livia Budai, a Hungarian mezzo-soprano with a hooty voice and little dramatic authority, failed utterly as Azucena. At the end of her big scene, she was impolitely but justifiably booed. Franco De Grandis, an Italian bass also in his Met debut, made an acceptable but hardly outstanding Ferrando. Leo Nucci's Count di Luna stirred some enthusiasm with "Il balen," but his portrayal could be counted as respectable routine at best. ---Donal Henahan, nytimes.com

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