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Tenor Alvarez, Displaying Expanding Waistline, Scores in Parma

By James Amott



Enlarge/Details

Oct. 19 (Bloomberg) -- Marcelo Alvarez, star tenor from Argentina, sent his audience into raptures at the Verdi Festival in Parma, northern Italy, a culinary paradise that's home to one of the country's most famous opera houses.

The former accountant who moved to Italy to pursue a vocal career at age 30 is singing Rodolfo in a new production of "Luisa Miller," part of the monthlong Verdi Festival. While his voice is going from strength to strength, he's falling into the classic singer's trap: a rapidly expanding waistline.

The myth that great opera singers somehow gain from being fat has been proven

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size undermines his performance by making his acting look clumsy and comical. It's a shame; he would otherwise cut a handsome, dashing figure.

Vocally, Alvarez gave everything, from delicate pianissimo moments to dramatic Italianate wailing. He made the most of the aria "Quando le Sere al Placido." "Luisa Miller," first performed in Naples in 1849, is a brutal tragedy from the end of Verdi's early period that hasn't gained the popularity of "La Traviata," which soon followed. The story of forbidden love, based on a Schiller play, is set in 18th-century Tyrol.

Commoner Luisa loves Rodolfo, who is secretly the son of nasty Count Walter.

Rodolfo has to marry Federica, a duchess, but he refuses and is imprisoned.

Meanwhile, courtier Wurm makes Luisa write to Rodolfo saying she loves someone else. When Rodolfo is released he angrily poisons Luisa and himself, but she tells him the truth and he manages to slay Wurm before they all die.

Giant Chess Boards

Director Denis Krief has some good ideas, creating a Kafkaesque world with a set comprising a wooden cabin and what look like large distorted chess boards. He uses giant screens to create a backdrop of colorful trees blowing in the wind. Still, some of the stage directing left something to be desired. There were too many false exits and a lot of bad sword acting. Soprano Fiorenza Cedolins, as Luisa, sang beautifully, but she had an awful hairdo and a frumpy costume, making it tough to see why Rodolfo was so smitten.

Basses Rafal Siwek, as Wurm, and Mario Luperi, as Walter, almost stole the show as the Gestapo-like baddies, while veteran baritone Leo Nucci was very watchable as Luisa's father. Nucci gets the aria most often found on opera favorites discs, "Sacra la Scelta," and the audience went bananas after he launched into the stratospheric tenor notes at the end of the cabaletta.

Conductor Donato Renzetti did a good job with the large chorus, while the orchestra was at times much too loud. The singers were also noticeably behind the orchestra on occasion.

"La Traviata" and "Oberto" are the other two operas in the festival, which includes a number of concerts and runs through Oct. 28. Parma's regular opera season runs from December to April.

The city is in the heart of the region that's home to Parma Ham and Parmiggiano Reggiano cheese. As you walk down the high street, stick your nose into one of the many delicatessens and you'll never forget that scent.

(James Amott writes for Bloomberg News. The opinions expressed are his own.)

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Last Updated: October 19, 2007 02:08 EDT

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