

NORMA

By Vincenzo Bellini

Hello, I'm Edgar Loessin with Loessin at Large. The role of Norma is generally considered to be the most difficult in the soprano repertoire. It is musically very taxing and dramatically demanding as well. She reigns as a proud Druid priestess in Gaul at the time of a Roman occupation in 50 BC. She is also a normal woman with passion and loving instincts, and a mother of two children. They are illicit. She has broken her vows of chastity to bear them. What's worse, her lover, Pollione, is a Roman. He has grown weary of Norma, and deflowers her confidante and temple virgin, Adalgisa. Ultimately the two ladies discover they love the same man.

Felice Romani was Bellini's librettist. He worked from a Parisian play called NORMA. It involves three mythical women: Medea, an enchantress, and a vestal virgin. Norma doesn't murder her children but seriously contemplates the act. Her condition harks back to Racine where love is a curse that leads to no good. In Norma's case it's death by fire.

These dastardly deeds and intrigue should add up to exciting theatre. But, in this production they don't. Bellini's sense of drama is weak. The piece is static. There are moments of pageantry but finally, it's the lyrical beauty and grandeur of the music that give the work its substance..

Absolutely nobody is helped by the costumes. Who knows what the Druids wore? Whatever, I don't think they went around in these enormous Hollywood B-Movie generic religious numbers. The wardrobe for the principals is unflattering and often gets in the way of the action.

As Norma, the lovely Fabiana Bravo got off to a soft, uncertain start but gained strength and authority as the four acts unfolded. One feels she will eventually find the complexities of this great role that are at present unfocused. She needs directorial help. Stacey Rishoi dazzles with vocal prowess and moving emotional layers as a troubled woman. She and Bravo make glorious sounds in their duets. German Villar, Pollione, is burdened with massive capes and stuff. He's a tenor of fine promise who needs to think about the acting aspects of doing opera. It is hard to imagine him as a military commanding officer and big time seducer of virgins with his wooden, somewhat petulant, behavior. In supporting roles, Zachary Stains, Flavio, is a bright, crisp, tenor with charm and notable presence, Todd Robinson as Oroveso is strong of purpose and vocally sure. Shoshanah Marote makes Clotilda a sweet memorable young girl.

John Pascoe directed the work with efficiency. The lighting by Jeff Davis helped establish the romantic ambiance that seemed part of Mr. Pascoe's conception. Maestro Peter Mark conducted the hauntingly beautiful score.

Maybe NORMA is an opera that should be heard and not seen. This is Edgar Loessin with Loessin at Large and I'll see you at the next opening.