

## Upbeat Aida Opens La Scala Season

*Stan Metzger - October 29, 2013*

La Scala has programmed two Verdi operas, Aida and Don Carlo, for the end of the 2012-2013 season, just before the inauguration of a new season with La Traviata. It is clear that the bicentenary of Giuseppe Verdi's birth has not gone unnoticed in Milan.

This production of Aida bears the signature of Franco Zeffirelli. It had its premiere as the opening of the 2006-2007 opera season and jumped to the front pages in the press, not due to its intrinsic quality but mainly because Roberto Alagna left the stage in the first act and never came back.

Zeffirelli is always faithful to himself, and his work continues to represent the antithesis of so many conceptual productions by modern stage directors. This Aida is a great stage show and could belong to the category of productions that get ovations at the Met when the curtain rises. If minimalist productions are fashionable today, Zeffirelli's is quite the opposite with its overwhelming sets: large, imposing, full of effigies, bas-reliefs and gold temples. It's a feast for the eyes and very appropriate for the first half of the opera. If the sets are spectacular, so are the costumes.

Zeffirelli's stage direction consists of narrating the story. Here the masses are more important than individual singers who almost go unnoticed during the first two acts. Zeffirelli's personal contribution is to place a priestess, whom he calls Akhmen in the program, on stage; she represents the tragic fate of the protagonists. Another interesting detail is staging the scene of Radames' trial in the temple of Vulcan so that the final tomb is located in the basement of the temple.

Gianandrea Nosedà, the current music director of the Teatro Regio in Turin, is one of the great Italian conductors today. The Orchestra of Teatro alla Scala is an exceptional group, and one especially appreciates them when there is a great conductor in the pit. That is exactly what happened on this occasion: Nosedà offered an exciting and compelling reading, particularly in the last two acts. The choir was also excellent.

Chinese soprano Hui He was a convincing Aida in vocal terms. The evolution of this singer has been impressive, and today she is one of the leading interpreters of the Ethiopian princess. Should she improve her stage performance, she could become a great Aida. She was at her best in the scene of the Nile, with a remarkable rendering of *O, Patria mia*.

Marco Berti is one of the most sought after interpreters of Radames, but I wasn't totally convinced by his singing. His voice is powerful and well projected but can be rather monotonous. All of his high notes are at full power, independent of what the score might say. In the first act I noticed some breath problems that disappeared later on. In the land of the blind, the one-eyed man is king.

I found Russian mezzo soprano Ekaterina Semenchuk somewhat disappointing as Amneris. I don't question her beautiful voice nor her singing style and expressiveness, but her voice lacks power and is at times insufficient. I've had the chance to hear her Amneris in other theaters, and it has always seemed that the size of her voice was more than offset by her other qualities. However, in a theater the size of La Scala her voice is not strong enough and disappears in ensembles.

Ambrogio Maestri has proved to be one of the foremost interpreters of Amonasro. His voice is quite large, and he is both a good singer and a good actor. The audience was not wrong to give him the biggest ovation.

Marco Spotti was a good Ramfis, singing with elegance and not too much power. Russian Alexander Tsymbalyuk was a luxury as the King.

La Scala was sold out. I have never seen so many people taking photographs before the performance started. The audience was warm during the performance and very positive at the end. The biggest cheers went to Hui He, Gianandrea Noseda and Ambrogio Maestri.