

OPERA Canada

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Michele Capalbo

“I think I have Verdi DNA,” says Michele Capalbo with a laugh. Those who have heard her sing might well agree, since the New York-based Canadian is making a splash as that rarest of birds, a Verdi soprano. Few singers would dare to make a professional debut in the exacting role of Héléne, in the French version of *I vespri Siciliani*, in front of thousands in Central Park in summer 1999—“the five-act, uncut version. It was baptism by fire, but so life-affirming!” Her dark-hued *lirico spinto*, with a full spectrum of tone colors from powerful *forte* to the softest high *pianissimo*, makes one sit up and take notice. Capalbo has since added *Aida*, *Violetta*, the two *Leonoras*, *Alice Ford*, *Desdemona*, *Amelia* (*Un ballo in maschera*) and the Verdi *Requiem* to her repertoire, a remarkable list of heavyweights for an artist still in the early stages of her career. “I love discovering these roles, and I have to thank l’Opéra de Québec for my first *Amelia* and my first *Tosca*,” she says on the phone from New York, having just returned from her debut at the Maggio Musicale Fiorentino in Poulenc’s *Stabat Mater*.

A native of Kitchener, Ont., Capalbo grew up in a musical family and sang in church choirs as a young girl. “My great-uncle sang opera in Toronto and New York,” she says. “My immediate family all like music, but there are no professional musicians.” After graduating from the University of Western Ontario, Capalbo moved to New York to study with Arthur Levy. “I was lucky—my teacher let me take my time, foster my growth in the *bel canto* tradition.” Capalbo is also known for her *Tosca*, and has recently added *Butterfly* to her repertoire. It was as



Michele Capalbo as *Amelia* in the Opéra de Québec production of *Un ballo in maschera*

Butterfly that she made her Houston Grand Opera debut in May. But her calling card remains *Aida*, which she has already sung in Toulouse and Mexico City, and will soon sing in Santiago, Chile, Toulon, France, and Houston in the next two seasons. Capalbo has fond memories of her appearance at the famed Bellas Artes in Mexico: “It was so exciting to sing on the same stage as Callas, who gave those fabulous performances.”

Tackling these heavy roles so soon has its hazards, and Capalbo is careful not to get carried away on stage. “There are times in *Tosca* when you are going to

spend the voice and there is nothing you can do about it—that’s the price of singing it.” Discipline off stage is also critical. “The secret is clean living! I meditate, do yoga and stretching, and lots of walking,” she says. “I make sure I rest, keep hydrated and eat well. It sounds pretty boring. My life isn’t so glamorous, because I would prefer not to have a five-year career.” —Joseph So