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'Aida' production needs Mechanics Hall stage

By Frank Magiera
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'Aida'

Where: Mechanics Hall, 321 Main St., Worcester

When: 7:30 p.m. March 30

How much: \$30 and \$35; \$15 for full-time students

WORCESTER-- The Metropolitan Opera gets a full-scale production. Broadway gets the Elton John adaptation. Worcester gets the concert performance.

"Aida" seems to be everywhere in this centennial observance of composer Giuseppe Verdi's death.

Opera Worcester will present a concert version of "Aida" March 30, staged by the National Lyric Opera of New York. But even the concert version, with its 100 singers and musicians, will need the facilities of Mechanics Hall, rather than the opera's usual venue of [Worcester State College's Sullivan Auditorium](#).

It is the first time that Opera Worcester has presented a concert version as part of its opera season, and the first time in more than a decade it has presented opera in Mechanics Hall.

"Worcester no longer has a stage large enough to accommodate a full production of this grandest of grand operas, but it does have an acoustically perfect stage where you can hear all the music," proclaims the concert brochure. So, forget about the elephants.

In Worcester, the title role of Aida will be sung by Michele Capalbo, an up-and-coming "Verdi soprano" who is getting her first stab at "Aida." She said Verdi raised the bar a bit in the demands he made on opera singers. And "Aida," in particular, requires unusual vocal coloring throughout each singer's range.

"You'll hear high floats and low chest tones," she said. "And that really defines what a Verdi soprano is."

Like most opera singers, Ms. Capalbo does not reveal her age for fear of limiting her role choices. She said, however, that she is young enough that her voice is still able to grow into heavier soprano qualities demanded by Verdi's repertoire.

"Verdi, in general, requires voices with darker, thicker colors. That's for the big Verdi roles, not necessarily the Gildas or the Violettas. They're often done by the lighter voice types. But larger Verdi sopranos, baritones, tenors, require a lot more color and warmth and fullness. And you get to hear the accumulation of all of his work and style in 'Aida' because it is his third-to-last opera, and he was mature by this time."

"Aida" was commissioned by the Khedive Ismail Pasha of Egypt to celebrate the opening of the Suez Canal. It had its premiere in Cairo on Dec. 24, 1871. Within the next few years, it was performed in Italy, England and the United States, but with a few changes.

"Verdi messed with his music a little bit as he recomposed it and recreated it for different houses," Ms. Capalbo said.

One of the changes was the addition of what is perhaps Aida's most famous aria, "O Patria Mia," which Ms. Capalbo will sing in Mechanics Hall. She also will sing the aria in a fully staged production in New York's Central Park this summer, even though the rest of the opera will be Verdi's original version. The aria will be added "because everybody expects it," she said.

"Aida" tells the story of an Ethiopian princess who has been captured by the Egyptians and is made a slave to the Egyptian princess Amneris, sung by mezzo-soprano Jane Bunnell. Both women fall in love with Radames, sung by tenor Jeffrey Springer. Aida's father attempts

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to rescue her; the full range of war, bloodshed and murder ensues. Of course, neither Aida nor her lover survives.

"Those are the rules," Ms. Capalbo said. "The mezzo basically sends the tenor to his death. The tenor and the soprano are entombed together at the end and it's actually very moving music."

Besides singing "Aida" for the first time, Ms. Capalbo will be making her New England debut with this production. She is a native Canadian from the city of London, Ontario, which is a few hours' drive from Toronto. Ms. Capalbo said she grew up singing choral music and did not discover opera until she was a teen-ager.

"Canada has a very strong choral scene," she said. "I spent a lot of my time singing in choirs and listening to whatever happened to be on the radio. My parents happened to like the Beatles, thus my first name."

When she decided the choral aesthetic in Canada no longer suited her interests, she moved to New York to find a voice teacher. That was eight years ago, and Ms. Capalbo's career has been turning toward opera ever since.

While the auditions, the managers and the voice teachers all are in New York, the opera jobs often are elsewhere. Ms. Capalbo has sung Micaela in "Carmen" with the Arizona Opera, and Tosca with the Montreal Opera and Fort Worth Opera in Texas. Later this year, she is scheduled to sing Micaela with the Kentucky Opera, and to perform in Boieldieu's "La Dame Blanche" with the Deutsche Opera in Dusseldorf, Germany, in the fall.

Ms. Capalbo said performing opera in concert productions is a different kind of experience than performing a staged opera -- and it's not always easier.

"Staging sometimes makes things a little bit easier, believe it or not, because you get into the character," she said. "But this is my first 'Aida,' so it doesn't hurt to sing her in a concert situation first. 'Aida' ... presents a more interesting challenge in that you have all of the makeup to contend with."

While even some concert versions of operas manage to include limited staging, Ms. Capalbo doesn't expect much, with 100 people jammed on the relatively tiny stage at Mechanics Hall.

"That doesn't exactly leave much room for interaction," she said. " 'Aida' is known for its huge choruses as well as everything else, so while they won't be marching past in their huge triumphal scenes, they will certainly have the voices and orchestra there to support the music."

Although she said she enjoys the distinction of being a "Verdi soprano," Ms. Capalbo sings the full lyrical opera repertoire, including Puccini and Bizet -- but not Wagner.

"I don't sing Wagner yet," she said. "Wagner requires more dramatic quality and more stamina to actually sing one of his roles throughout. That can come with time, experience and a readiness to throw yourself on a sword."

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