

Soprano Angela Meade conquers 'Norma'



In this photo released by the Caramoor International Music Festival, soprano Angela Meade performs in Bellini's 'Norma,' Saturday, July 10, 2010 in Katonah, N.Y. (AP Photo/Gabe Palacio, Caramoor International Music Festival)

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By MIKE SILVERMAN
For The Associated Press

KATONAH, N.Y. (AP) - In the world of opera, there is no greater challenge for a performer than the heroine of Bellini's 1831 masterpiece, "Norma."

And in the world of talented young singers, there may be none with greater promise just now than 32-year-old American soprano Angela Meade.

The two crossed paths on Saturday night at the Caramoor International Music Festival with extraordinary results. Meade gave a performance of power and poise that had the audience repeatedly interrupting with cheers and reinforced the impression that she has a remarkable career ahead of her.

Dramatically, the role of Norma has almost every ingredient imaginable. A Druid priestess secretly in love with the Roman occupier, Pollione, she is by turns a devout religious leader, a fierce warrior, a steadfast friend, a jealous rival, a desperate mother, and finally a figure of grandeur who sacrifices her own life.

Bellini gives Norma music that is thrilling in its melodic beauty and nobility but which also imposes severe tests on any interpreter. Her entrance aria, "Casta diva" ("Chaste goddess"), requires phenomenal breath control, immaculate coloratura ornamentation, and an ability to move seamlessly between pianissimos and full-out blasts of volume.

And that's just for starters. During the course of three hours, she sings two extended duets with her protege, Adalgisa (here the excellent soprano Keri Alkema), an anguished soliloquy as she contemplates infanticide, a confrontation with her faithless lover and a closing scene of sublime serenity.

Meade met each test with an apparent ease rare in a singer still so early in her career. She displayed a voice of generous size and evenness of tone throughout its entire range from middle to high C - and

above. She dashed off the most intricate embellishments with aplomb. Her soft singing had a hushed beauty, and her more stentorian outbursts were imposing, even if they may have stretched her lyric instrument to its capacity.

Dramatically it's harder to judge her, since this was a concert performance with the singers in evening dress in front of the orchestra on stage. What Meade conveyed of the character's emotional turmoil with gestures and facial expressions didn't always seem to plumb the depth of the character, but there's plenty of time for her to grow into the role.

After all, Meade is really at the beginning of her career. She made her professional debut in auspicious fashion just two years ago, subbing for an ailing colleague in Verdi's "Ernani" at the Metropolitan Opera. She also is featured in the documentary film "The Audition" as one of the winners of the Met's 2007 National Grand Council Auditions - where she sang "Casta diva."

"Norma" is by no means a one-woman show, and Meade was fortunate in her Adalgisa. Alkema recently switched from mezzo to soprano repertory, and that's evident in the unusual power she commands in her lower register. Once past a shaky opening aria, she sang with gorgeous, dramatically incisive tone and revealed great facility in coloratura.

In the concluding passage of their final duet, "Si, fino all'ore estremo" ("Yes, until the final hour of life"), she and Meade dazzled the audience with ornamentation far more intricate than is usually attempted. At the end, when their voices joined in a high C, she was unable to hold hers quite as long as Meade, but she handled the moment with a disarming grin.

As Pollione, tenor Emmanuel di Villarosa sounded dry and constricted at full volume but mustered some elegance in the softer passages. Bass-baritone Daniel Mobbs excelled in his few moments in the undernourished role of Oroveso, Norma's stern father.

Will Crutchfield, the guiding hand behind the Bel Canto at Caramoor series, conducted the Orchestra of St. Luke's with evident love for and deep knowledge of the score, though he allowed the tempo to droop in a few places.

There is one more performance Friday.

Online: <http://www.caramoor.org/>

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