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Angela Conquers 'Norma'

The soprano Angela Meade, left, drew tumultuous ovations after performing the title role in Bellini's opera. Review, PAGE 3

SUSAN FARLEY FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

THE Arts

The Future Arrives for a Soprano, as She Steps Into a Demanding Role

KATONAH, N.Y. — In the finals of the 2007 Metropolitan Opera National Council Auditions, the young American soprano Angela Meade

knocked out an audience at the Met with a magisterial and vocally sumptuous performance of “Casta

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Diva,” Norma’s famous aria from the great Bellini opera that bears her name. Her performance can be seen on “The Audition,” the revealing recent documentary by Susan Froemke about the finals for the competition that year.

Many opera buffs and singers would choose Norma as the hardest soprano role in the repertory, requiring agile coloratura technique, elegant bel canto lyricism, Wagnerian power for the soaring dramatic outbursts, stamina and more. A real Norma — a singer able to do justice to Bellini’s revered druid priestess who breaks her vows of chastity and falls for Pollione, the Roman proconsul in Gaul — does not come along very often. With her entrancing “Casta Diva,” Ms. Meade showed potential to be a great Norma of the future.



Susan Farley for The New York Times

Norma Angela Meade, center, in the title role at the Caramoor International Music Festival, with Keri Alkema, right, and Will Crutchfield conducting.

That future arrived on Saturday night here at the Caramoor International Music Festival when Ms. Meade, now 32, sang the title role of “Norma” in a concert performance conducted by Will Crutchfield, this summer’s initial offering in the popular Bel Canto at Caramoor series. This was the first

of two weekend performances of that Bellini opera, and Ms. Meade’s first time singing the role complete.

The cast over all was strong, especially the immensely gifted soprano Keri Alkema, who was an exceptional Adalgisa, the druid priestess who turns out to be Norma’s

younger rival for the inconstant Pollione's love. But Ms. Meade's stunning Norma was the big news.

From the first lines of Norma's entrance — in which the druids, chafing under the degradation they suffer from the Romans, are poised to rebel — Ms. Meade sounded in complete command of the role, delivering the character's charged, defiant dramatic recitative with gleaming sound and incisive attack. The druids await the blessing of their prophetic high priestess on the plan to battle the Romans. Norma counsels peace in "Casta Diva," and Ms. Meade sang it beautifully, filling the long-spun lines with rich, unforced sound, shaping the phrases with bittersweet poignancy, gracing the melody with tasteful embellishments and lifting her voice to majestic highs.

Later, when Adalgisa confides to Norma that she has forsaken her vows and fallen in love, Norma responds with magnanimous tenderness, until she learns that Adalgisa's lover is also Pollione. Vocally, Ms. Meade handled the emotional shift brilliantly, unleashing hard-edged, piercing phrases to denounce Adalgisa. As an actress, Ms. Meade had a Junoesque presence and conveyed disarming honesty. She does not

yet have the raspy, Callas-like vehemence that is called for, but that should come. Still, she let fly chilling top notes. She was even more impressive when she caressed soulful pianissimo phrases.

Ms. Alkema won many fans in New York last season for her richly sung Donna Elvira in the New York City Opera's new production of Mozart's "Don Giovanni." Her lustrous, affecting Adalgisa here revealed additional dimensions to her artistry. In the scenes between Norma and Adalgisa, especially the classic duet "Mira, o Norma," Ms. Meade and Ms. Alkema sensitively blended their voices. Later, when the priestesses decide to forsake Pollione and pledge sisterly comradeship, Ms. Meade and Ms. Alkema sang with infectious ease and joy. The ascending scales in thirds were easily in sync and perfectly in tune.

The bass-baritone Daniel Mobbs brought a stentorian bass-baritone voice to his sympathetic portrayal of Norma's father, Oroveso, the conflicted chief of the druids, restless to defend his people. As Pollione, the tenor Emmanuel di Villarosa sang with genuine Italianate ardor and a sizable, athletic voice, marred only by moments of shaky pitch and faltering breath control.

Mr. Crutchfield drew a stylistically informed, sure-paced and well-played performance of this bel canto masterpiece from the Orchestra of St. Luke's. The Caramoor Festival Chorus sang with a fullness that belied its small ranks. The entire cast, especially Ms. Meade, was fortunate to have coached this opera under Mr. Crutchfield, who has made Bel Canto at Caramoor an important workshop for fresh investigation into the practice and style of this misunderstood repertory.

What is the future for Ms. Meade, who made her Met debut in 2008 on short notice, singing the role of Elvira in Verdi's "Ernani" for a soprano who was ill? Her only Met assignment next season is again as a cover: the title role in Rossini's "Armida." Will the Met catch up with the opera fans who have embraced Ms. Meade? The ovations on Saturday were tumultuous.

Bel Canto at Caramoor presents another performance of Bellini's "Norma" in concert starring Angela Meade on Friday at Caramoor, 149 Girdle Ridge Road, Katonah, N.Y.; (914) 232-1252, caramoor.org