

OPERA NEWS

IN REVIEW

Stiffelio, Chautauqua Opera 7/9/04



Robert Breault and Brenda Harris

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Chautauqua Opera, the oldest continuously producing summer opera company in the U.S., devoted its seventy-fifth-anniversary season to works exploring issues of faith. An excellent start was made on July 9 with the local premiere of Verdi's *Stiffelio*, which centers (rarely enough for the operatic genre) on the power of Christian forgiveness.

Decidedly successful local debutant David Lawton and his reduced orchestra of thirty-four laid out Verdi's paragraphs with proper architectural definition. The delicate string writing throughout emerged with admirable clarity, and coordination between pit and stage remained taut. Lawton also coauthored (with Nicholas Muni) the reasonably successful English translation and provided the orchestral materials. Jay Lesenger's staging kept things swift and logical; each scene's opening stage pictures, posed behind scrims that (thank goodness) then lifted, proved very striking. Helen E. Rodgers's rich, Dickensian costumes did full justice to the nineteenth century's sartorial art. Erhard Rom's handsome sets (reminiscent in somberness — if not, of course, in scale — of Michael Scott's for the Met's 1993 staging) suited the piece's sober tone well, lacking only some sense of a fire in the imposing marble fireplace in which two incriminating documents had to be consumed instantly. Christopher Ostrom's provided handsome, apt autumnal lighting.

Ideally, one would want the likes of Ponselle, Martinelli and Tibbett in *Stiffelio*: the kind of Verdian powerhouse virtuosos now seemingly near-extinct. But given the size of Norton Hall, Chautauqua Opera fielded strong contenders. Local favorite Robert Breault made an excellent impression, his mellifluous tenor boasting clarity of both tone and diction; clearly reveling in high notes, he sang with notable dynamic variety. It would be interesting to hear Breault essay *Un Ballo in Maschera*. In Lina's wickedly challenging music, the musicianly, dignified Brenda Harris provided some exciting moments (particularly cutting through the ensemble at full dynamic throttle once warmed up), as well as some of considerable beauty (particularly in soft singing). At mezzo forte, her voice sometimes lost its sheen and tonal focus. Harris achieved her best soaring in descant above Carol Rausch's notably good chorus at the end. Steven Condy's perfunctory exit after a strong account of Stankar's big scene showed that he still has something to learn in stage polish. But he caught the gruff old soldier's fierce dilemma well, producing a pleasing, characterful sound, with tapered dynamics and clear diction.

Four Apprentice Artists took solo roles. John C. Taylor showed a cultured *basso cantante* as Jorg, the hero's mentor and voice of conscience. Tenor Hugo A. Vera, if not displaying great conviction as Lina's seducer Raffaele, sang with security and focus. The presence and contributions to the testing ensembles of Sarah Kleeman (Dorothea) and Jason Karn (Federico) showed promise.

DAVID SHENGOLD