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Opera

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'Siegfried' at Covent Garden
Salome Jicia—Bellinian thread

Laura Kaminsky: opera against dystopia

Elisabeth Rethberg on record

Carlisle Floyd's centenary



to have Ann Hallenberg enact the role to the hilt, with complete commitment and stylistic authority. If her voice has in places an autumnal tinge and lessened volume, she showed remarkable breath control and trills—and the perfectly timed and weighted utterance that Handelian recitative demands. I don't think Carnegie Hall has witnessed such a decades-defying diva triumph since Mariella Devia's astounding *Roberto Devereux* in 2014. Hallenberg has much left to give.



Ann Hallenberg and Hilary Cronin in 'Hercules' at Carnegie Hall

All the singers were dressed in funeral black save for Hilary Cronin as the 'enemy' princess Iole (who shares traits with *Idomeneo's* Ilia), clad in yellow. The British light Baroque soprano of the moment, in the bright tradition of Lynne Dawson, Cronin made a lovely impression. Deep feeling augmented smooth passagework, sustained phrases and a nicely blooming upper register. Her scenes with Hallenberg's jealous then sorrowful, queen and with David Portillo (as Hyllus, her Idamante-like suitor) were emotional highlights. With valiant manner, splendid diction and a newly powerful lower register and rapid (if occasionally aspirated) coloratura, Portillo sounded ready for his next role debut—which in fact is *Idomeneo*. In the somewhat neutral role of the herald Lichas—a confidant of both Hercules and Dejanira—the countertenor Alexander Chance made a somewhat neutral Carnegie debut. Thoroughly attuned to the style (despite no evident trill), his clear, pleasant timbre travelling well, he seemed detached from the proceedings, without the dramatic stance and body language his colleagues exhibited. When Lichas entered to report his beloved master's horrific fate, Chance might have been reporting that the sherry at High Table had been subpar. Additional onstage experience may grant this 33-year-old the necessary dramatic presence. Chance returns with Bicket for next year's *Alessandro*, starring Christophe Dumaux and Joëlle Harvey. The bass-baritone Jonathan Woody brought expert declamation and resonant impact to the High Priest's brief but crucial interventions.

DAVID SHENGOLD

Sarasota

For many years the music of Verdi has been the heart and soul of SARASOTA OPERA programming. So it was again this year during the 2026 Winter Festival, with the season built around *Il trovatore*, conducted by the company's artistic director Victor DeRenzi. This time around the production had special resonance, following

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the announcement in December that DeRenzi was leaving the company at the end of his contract in May. In his 44 years as artistic director, the conductor's passionate embrace of Italian opera was the guiding force behind the Verdi Cycle, the visionary 28-year project, completed in 2016, that put Sarasota on the map as the only company in the world to produce all 27 of the composer's operas, along with another half-dozen revised or alternative versions. DeRenzi has been lionized for his titanic achievement—a bust of him stands in the SARASOTA OPERA HOUSE—but there were no events scheduled to honour his legacy. (He told me that he is not 'retiring', had disagreements with the board of trustees, and wanted to exit without fanfare.) The departure of a long-time leader can be awkward, but a post-DeRenzi succession plan was in place, with the company's general director Richard Russell set to assume top management and artistic duties starting in June.

Fittingly, for a swansong of sorts, *Il trovatore* (seen on March 18) was strongly cast with excellent voices in the four principal roles: Count di Luna (Ricardo José Rivera), Leonora (Aviva Fortunata), Azucena (Lisa Chavez) and Manrico (Victor Starsky), as well as Ferrando, whose opening narrative was a stentorian tour de force by the bass Young Bok Kim. The opera has been on the Sarasota schedule in three seasons since 1993 (plus the French adaptation, *Le Trouvère*), and it featured a gorgeous set by Michael Schweikardt evoking 15th-century Spain and a plush array of medieval costumes by Howard Tsvi Kaplan. Under the director Marco Nisticò, the problematic Cammarano libretto, with so much of the far-fetched plot taking place in the past or offstage, was deftly negotiated to concentrate on the virtuosic singing while maintaining the propulsive momentum of the melodrama.

Rivera has the makings of a great Verdi baritone, and his big sound filled the theatre with expressive depth of feeling in 'Il balen del suo sorriso', the Count's wide-ranging aria to Leonora. Chavez displayed impressive verismo zeal in portraying the death-haunted gypsy Azucena in pivotal scenes—especially with her piercing 'Stride la vampa', in which the mezzo declares the theme of vengeance that drives the opera. Fortunata's lyrical soprano was also a highlight, as deployed in Leonora's amazing Act 4 scene at the foot of the tower where Manrico was imprisoned, including her breathtakingly phrased 'D'amor sull'ali rosee'. Starsky's troubadour had some fine moments, beginning with his initial serenade, delivered sweetly from backstage to harp accompaniment, but while Manrico's famously interpolated high Cs in 'Di quella pira' were solidly delivered to bring down the Act 3 curtain, the notes came across as more workmanlike than the glorious feat of vocal showmanship they can be.

DeRenzi also conducted *La Bohème*, which was staged by his wife Stephanie Sundine, a soprano who was an important presence at the company during her husband's tenure. The production, which has been revived four times since its 2006 debut, is beautifully designed by David P. Gordon and manages to accommodate with grace and style more than 70 performers on the stage for the colourful, busy Café Momus act.



Leading ladies at Sarasota Opera: (l. to r.) Raquel González as Hanna Glawari, Lisa Chavez as Azucena and Hanna Brammer as Susannah

On February 25 the role of Rodolfo was played by David Freides, a Sarasota Opera studio artist who was covering the role for the indisposed WooYoung Yoon. Freides got off to a rocky start in the garret, his light tenor dwarfed by the other Bohemians, a boisterous crew seasoned together through rehearsals and four previous performances: Filippo Fontana as Marcello, Riley Findley as Schaunard and Young Bok Kim as Colline. The good news is that Freides found his footing relatively quickly, in time for the entrance of Mimì (the heartbreaking Ashley Milanese), and their soaring duet ‘O soave fanciulla’ ended the first act to robust applause. From that point he went on to give a commendable performance. I attended *La Bohème* a second time, on March 28, to take in Yoon as Rodolfo; he was outstanding, ardent and assured, singing in a warmly romantic tone with meticulous intonation and polished diction, conveying the pain and sorrow of tragic lost love with powerful emotion.

Fontana’s Marcello was an especially appealing character, and his on-again-off-again girlfriend Musetta was sung with flamboyant flair by Virginia Mims, whose Act 2 Waltz was a showstopper. Benoît (Brian Kontes) and Alcindoro (Hans Tashjian) were played in delicious comic style. DeRenzi expertly realized the impressionistic orchestration that begins Act 3, with snow falling at dawn.

Susannah (seen on March 25) was Carlisle Floyd’s first full-length opera, written when he was a 28-year-old professor on the music faculty at Florida State University, where the work had its premiere (with Phyllis Curtin in the title role) in 1955. This year marks Floyd’s centennial as well as the 100th birthday of the Sarasota Opera

House. (Its 1926 opening as a vaudeville theatre was commemorated by a concert in April.) The company has a history with the composer, having previously performed *Susannah* several times as well as his *Of Mice and Men* in a 2013 production attended by Floyd (who died in 2021).

Hanna Brammer sang Susannah Polk, who falls afoul of the puritanical townsfolk in New Hope Valley in the mountains of Tennessee. After Susannah is seen bathing nude in a creek near her cabin in the woods by church elders in search of a baptismal pool, she is slandered and ostracized by the community—and raped by an itinerant preacher. Conducted by Jessé Martins, Floyd's score is rich with the influence of hymns, folk ballads, square-dance fiddling and other musical forms of Americana. The libretto, which the composer wrote, is loaded with Appalachian vernacular, as in 'shore' for 'sure', 'crick' for 'creek' and 'jes' for 'just'.

The role fitted Brammer exquisitely, showing off not only her lyrical soprano but also her dancing. From the porch of Susannah's cabin, she sang a pair of superb arias—surely among the best in all of American opera. In Act 1, 'Ain't it a pretty night?' floated over a bed of strings against the backdrop of a starry sky, as Susannah dreamed of places beyond the mountains where she'd someday like to be. Brammer's account of the Act 2 aria 'The trees on the mountains are cold and bare' was devastatingly sad, her voice blossoming in the upper register of Floyd's verse on 'a false-hearted lover ... who made me love him, then left me alone'.

The bass-baritone Jason Zacher sang the evangelist Olin Blicht, and he gave booming voice to arias about lust ('I'm a lonely man, Susannah') and begging for forgiveness. The tenor Jeremy Brauner played Susannah's alcoholic brother Sam with a mix of folksy philosophy and murderous rage. Mrs McLean (the mezzo Lindsey Polcyn) epitomized self-righteousness with her sternness, jutting jaw and harsh words. Little Bat, the lying teenager who betrays Susannah, was played with suitable 'cringiness' by the tenor Dylan Schang.

Susannah is divided into two acts, each with five relatively short scenes. In this production, directed by Martha Collins in sets by R. Keith Brumley (borrowed from Des Moines Metro Opera), there was a pause between each scene while the set was changed behind the curtain. The design was handsomely realistic, but all of the pauses with the curtain down undermined the dramatic momentum, suggesting that a more abstract sort of staging—or a semi-staged concert version—might have served the opera better, focusing on Floyd's score and libretto without the distraction of numerous set changes.

The Merry Widow (seen on March 4), conducted by Anthony Barrese and directed by Katherine M. Carter, provided a certain lightness of repertoire to the spring line-up. Sarasota commissioned a new production with scenic design by Steven C. Kemp that was a marvel of flexibility and charm—with Art Nouveau decoration, a pair of topiary swans, and the ingenuity to transform smoothly from a garden summerhouse to a party at Maxim's. Through the years, Franz Lehár's Viennese operetta has been staged quite often on Broadway and has inspired three Hollywood films, but it is tricky to bring off successfully.

For the Sarasota cast, an ability to move freely between classical singing and musical theatre—even in the English translation of the Broadway lyricist Sheldon Harnick—proved elusive. The sparkling vocal technique and comic timing that were needed were lacking, especially in the extensive spoken dialogue. Tellingly, one of the best numbers was the most operatic in scale, with Raquel González, as the wealthy widow Hanna Glawari, giving a dazzling performance of the ‘Vilja’ song—her light, bright soprano projecting vividly amid the large chorus. The baritone Jake Stamatis as Count Danilo, the playboy of Hanna’s dreams, led ‘Girls, girls, girls’ with panache. In addition, Patrick Bessenbacher and Sara Kennedy were well-matched as Camille and Valencienne, the not-so-secret romance of the operetta.

JOHN FLEMING

Washington

After severing ties with the Kennedy Center in January, WASHINGTON NATIONAL OPERA has taken up temporary residence in LISNER AUDITORIUM, where the company presented a new production of *Treemonisha* directed by Denyce Graves (seen on March 8). Damien Sneed adapted and orchestrated Scott Joplin’s original score and Kyle Bass provided dialogue and additional lyrics. Sneed’s fiddling with the score didn’t necessarily improve it, but he did expand it, gently, and in the right direction. The same can’t be said about Bass’s tinkering with the libretto. The earnest original story has a dark side, which Bass lightened, which was unnecessary.

Graves’s production had much charm. It’s not an easy task to direct a piece with so many in-built stereotypes, but she succeeded. She avoided

Justin Austin as Remus and Viviana Goodwin as Treemonisha at Washington National Opera



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