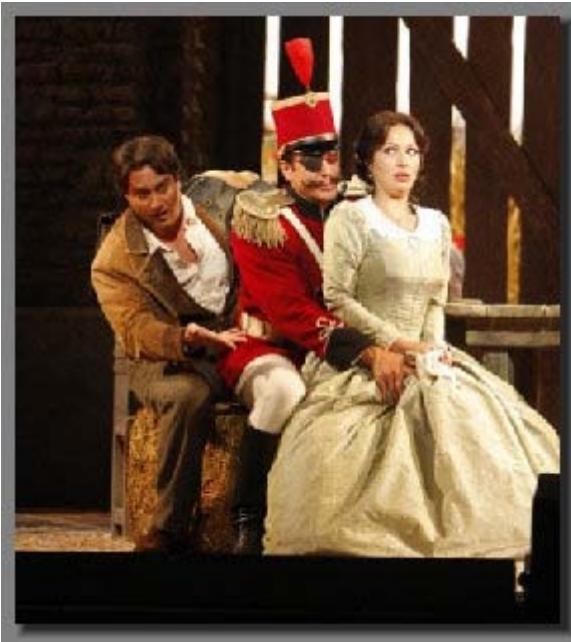


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'L'Elisir d'Amore' opens the LA Opera season with a pleasing but lackluster production.



Giuseppe Filianoti (Nemorino), Nathan Gunn (Belcore), Nino Machaidze (Adina).
Photo: Robert Millard

**GAETANO DONIZETTI
L'ELISIR D'AMORE
LOS ANGELES OPERA
SEPTEMBER 12, 2009**

By: Carol Jean Delmar
OperaOnline.us

It didn't seem like the opening night of the season at Los Angeles Opera. Opening night

is always very glitzy and glamorous. The Music Center Plaza is usually tented, and the waiters are always buzzing around preparing for the post-performance gala. The tables are elaborately decorated. There is a red carpet where celebrities and patrons stop to have their pictures taken. And then after the performance, I always hear a band inside the tent when en route to my car. I glance at the beautifully adorned tables as I walk by, and I always think that maybe one day somebody will invite me so that I too can mingle and taste the fine cuisine that I envision within. But this year the picture was quite different.

The red carpet was still there when I arrived and there was a pre-performance reception, but the setting was much starker. There was no tent. The gala was set to take place in the Grand Hall of the Dorothy Chandler Pavilion; and when I went to the press reception at intermission, the usual coffee, tea and sweets were no longer there. Wine was served, and the classical music press corps had dwindled.

The performance hit me in much the same fashion. Although this “L’Elisir d’Amore” was performed charmingly on a flexible and engaging set, the opening night performance usually has star power and makes those of us in the audience feel regal. Plus there is usually a second opera to look forward to the following day.

Not this year. The opening night performance was it, and the production left me feeling blazé.

Los Angeles Opera wasn’t totally to blame, though. Everyone got sick. Last April it was announced that the Nemorino, Rolando Villazón, would undergo surgery to remove a cyst on his vocal cord. His replacement would be the young tenor, Giuseppe Filianoti, a winner of Plácido Domingo’s Operalia competition. But Filianoti had been turned away at La Scala after a shaky dress rehearsal as Don Carlo. He subsequently gave a more solid performance as the Duke of Mantua at the Met.

Then the Dr. Dulcamara, Ruggero Raimondi, ruptured his Achilles tendon and was replaced by his cover, a very young Giorgio Caoduro.

The Adina, Nino Machaidze, was hardly a household name. And I heard that Nathan Gunn had been ill during rehearsals.

The replacements, plus the fact that LA Opera has vastly over extended itself by producing a \$32 million “Ring” cycle in this economy, have put LA Opera in “crisis” mode according to someone in the know within the company. I will make no comment other than to say that much of the company’s predicament could have been avoided and has been aggravated by its disorganization and unwillingness to consider alternatives.

Now back to “L’Elisir d’Amore,” which has a light, endearing, enjoyable plot. Basically, peasant boy desires rich girl who is being romanced by handsome soldier. Love potion brings boy and girl together as provided by quack doctor. Poor boy inherits money and becomes rich boy, and the boy and the girl live happily ever after.

The replication of Adina's Italian farm during the 19th century was adequate. The rustic tan-colored flagstone fit nicely with the village costumes; and the props, furniture and walls were moved in and out and lifted accordingly, sometimes revealing a stark and empty backdrop which could have been lit more creatively.

The biggest asset to this production was Nino Machaidze as Adina. A little bit Anna Netrebko, a little bit Jennifer Lopez – Machaidze is very much Nino Machaidze, and she exhibits her singular talent internationally now. Her voice is strong, centered and secure; she has the ability to deliver a single tone with multiple colors, a phrase with much artistic nuance. Her lower notes are warm; higher tones are free to fly. And it is easy for her to hit a single high A, B-flat or B without the luxury of having lower notes to prepare her for the task.

Giuseppe Filianoti's lyric tenor has a distinctive Italianate timbre that renders it unique, which was especially evident in his "Una furtiva lagrima." However he is not yet ready to shine on the world stage. He seemed to weave himself in and out of trouble, sometimes singing without sufficient support, sometimes unable to relax and open his throat sufficiently to enable the connection between his tones in the mask and the faucet lower down that empowers them. It is best to nurture great talent slowly to achieve an optimum result which is enduring.

Nathan Gunn (Belcore) revealed his charisma and stage presence at the onset. But I detected a vibrato or wobble that at times was indistinguishable from the coloratura passages he was crooning.

Giorgio Caoduro, the very young Dr. Dulcamara who replaced Raimondi, shows much promise but wasn't quite ripe for the part. Either we look for the consummate bass or bass-baritone in Dulcamara, or we hope to see the acting characteristics of a developed comic basso buffo.

We enjoyed our glimpse of soprano Valerie Vinzant who is a second year member of Los Angeles Opera's Domingo-Thornton Young Artist Program. Her refreshing Giannetta will no doubt be the beginning of many more memorable roles to come.

Conductor James Conlon led the Los Angeles Opera Orchestra with precision, always attuned to the intricacies of the bel canto style, and Grant Gershon's chorus was up to the task.

Although this "L'Elisir d'Amore" succeeded as a satisfying comedy with an element of pathos, the sets, staging and performances should have been far more colorful and taken us out of the norm and into the territory we expect for the opening night of the opera season.

Libretto by Felice Romani
Based on Eugène Scribe's text for Daniel Auber's "Le Philtre"
Conductor: James Conlon

Director: Stephen Lawless

Scenery & Costume Designer: Johan Engels

Lighting Designer: Joan Sullivan-Genthal

Concertmaster: Stuart Canin

Associate Conductor-Chorus Master: Grant Gershon

Assistant Director: Nicola Bowie

Co-production revival with Grand Théâtre de Genève.