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**Los Angeles Opera's Violetta, Marina Poplavskaya – a great talent with one of the most beautiful soprano voices I have heard in years.**



Photo: Robert Millard

GIUSEPPE VERDI  
LA TRAVIATA  
LOS ANGELES OPERA  
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By: Carol Jean Delmar  
OperaOnline.us

Los Angeles Opera is ending its 2008-09 season with what the man sitting next to me called “easy-listening opera.” What made this “La Traviata” so easy to listen to was the marvelous honey-toned Russian soprano, Marina Poplavskaya.

This is the same Giovanni Agostinucci production I raved about in September 2006, which starred Renée Fleming as the dying courtesan, Violetta; and Rolando Villazón as

her smitten lover, Alfredo. The sets are a little worn though, yet still attractive: the Act 1 party scene in golds and beiges; the Act 2 country retreat with fine wood paneling; Flora's abode in dazzling reds; and Violetta's room with a fashionable bed for her to die on. Both Fleming and Villazón inhabited their roles. Villazón exhibited charisma and energy, and Fleming had soul.

The current production is quite different though. The excitement isn't there. Although the artists sang and acted well, I didn't "feel" much and neither did they -- and that goes for conductor Grant Gershon as well. Passionate conductors draw passion from their orchestras. This orchestra was at times slow. At times the conductor, singers and musicians weren't in sync. The disinterested musicians disinterested me. It was a precise, correct textbook reading. Grant Gershon played it too safe.

That could have been the reason that although Poplavskaya portrayed Violetta with sensitivity, she lacked inner depth. I wanted to see more of the "Dying Swan" in her. When she fell to the ground in the last act, it was as if director Marta Domingo had taught her the mechanics of a stage fall, and she followed through without variation. She bent her knees, fell on her hip and rolled to her side. Plop! She just did it. Her subsequent fall to her death could have been effective because of the stylized positioning of her body, except we were far too busy watching the technicalities of the maneuver to feel the pathos. How did she get into that position?

Yet in spite of these minute performance defects, Poplavskaya has proved to me that she is a great talent with one of the most beautiful soprano voices I have heard in years. The timbre and quality of her voice evoke visions of a pure crystalline stream traveling effortlessly through hills and dales. Her ease of delivery is phenomenal. There was absolutely no strain as she navigated through the coloratura passages and none of the customary narrowness of tone. Hers is the mellow voice of a mezzo-soprano with the top range of a coloratura and the power of a Wagnerian. Yet she chose not to sing the high E-flat at the end of "Sempre libera." She built to a climax that just didn't happen. What a disappointment! But then some music directors find the note "gauche," according to Renée Fleming in a 2006 LA Times article. Not me. If you've got it, flaunt it, I say.

Another disappointment was Massimo Giordano's Alfredo Germont. He sang freely with emotion. He did all the right things in all the right places, yet the resulting performance failed to thrill. Although resonant, the voice had no foundation -- possibly more support would have helped -- and there was a lack of substance to his portrayal.

Andrzej Dobber fared better as the elder Germont. His voice and characterization had the substantial quality that Giordano was lacking. Dobber sang Germont with elegance and dignity, entreating Violetta to leave Alfredo for the sake of his daughter's happiness. More sympathy toward Violetta would have added dimension.

Philip Cokorinos was a noteworthy Baron Douphol, a character that often fades into the woodwork. Not Cokorinos -- his burnished bass-baritone projected into a portrayal of note. Daniel Armstrong (Marquis d'Obigny) and Ryan McKinny (Dr. Grenvil) sang with

robust vocal security and presence. Hak Soo Kim was a fine Gastone. Erica Brookhyser added a unique characterization to Annina, and Margaret Thompson sang Flora with zest.

The dancers were insecure as they executed their combinations, but soloist Timo Nuñez made up for their lack of savoir-faire with precise attention to rhythm and exactness.

I want to thank director Marta Domingo for introducing the city of Los Angeles to Marina Poplavskaya. Poplavskaya could just stand in an empty room without costume or makeup and sing, and the experience would be awe-inspiring. I continue to believe that nowadays there is far too much emphasis on productions and not enough focus on the voice. In my mind, opera should always be about the voice. Poplavskaya proves that vocal beauty has no equal. She helps us remember why we fell in love with opera in the first place.

Libretto by Francesco Maria Piave

Based on the play “La Dame aux Camélias” by Alexandre Dumas fils

Director: Marta Domingo

Conductor and Chorus Master: Grant Gershon

Scenery and Costume Designer: Giovanni Agostinucci

Lighting Designer: Daniel Ordower

Choreographer: Kitty McNamee

Concertmaster: Stuart Canin