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Denyce Graves brings allure to Hollywood Bowl ‘Carmen.’

GEORGES BIZET
CARMEN
LA PHIL – HOLLYWOOD BOWL
JULY 13, 2008

By Carol Jean Delmar
OperaOnline.us

The summer brings new challenges to today’s opera singers as they move from the inside elegance and haute couture of the opera house to the outside kick-back, lay-back open-air amphitheater, where the picnicker and amplifier rule. Sunday night, July 13, was no exception.

The Los Angeles Philharmonic’s concert version of Georges Bizet’s “Carmen” at the Hollywood Bowl began tentatively, probably because the shell of the Bowl with its

extravagant lighting inside wasn't quite evident in contrast to the night-time darkness, probably because the festivities began in the late dusk when it wasn't quite dark yet. A few final bites of fruit salad as the sun faded, a sip of wine, and the thousands of spectators could have just as well been at the Hollywood Bowl for a rock concert or bullfight as an opera performance.

There were gargantuan screens on either side of the forum, and amplification. The orchestra and singers still seemed close, yet far away at the same time, since I found my eyes glued to the screens; and the amplification made me question what I was hearing. Such falsities have been known to make an insignificant voice one of luxury; a luxurious voice, one of distortion.

The night before, I had attended another, more intimate open-air gathering at the Beverly Hills Civic Center Plaza where two of the comprimarios in this "Carmen" had been featured. Their voices had been worthy of accolades that night, yet for this "Carmen," the diamond quality of their sounds had mysteriously faded. Maybe they weren't standing close enough to the microphone. I simply don't know what happens when the feel of the air and the sound of the crickets take precedence.

The star of the evening was mezzo-soprano Denyce Graves, whose voice and stature were clearly voluptuous. Each of her gowns was more opulent than the last – a necessary visual for an operatic concert without sets that at first seemed void of color and character.

The ultimate Carmen, Graves has a chocolaty voice that has retained its richness, but at times seems overly mature for the body of the singer it inhabits. A slight wobble, some high notes that don't quite match the flow from below – she should be able to regenerate the gloriousness, for it is difficult to find a Carmen so well-suited for the role -- vocally, physically and charismatically.

Tenor Stuart Skelton also had a slow start. Charismatically, he wasn't Don José. It was easy to see why Carmen switched to Escamillo. At times Skelton's tenor sounded forced; at times tones were split between throat and resonators; but there were moments of utter lyricism, when he surprised us with a "La fleur que tu m'avais jetée" of excellence. His voice swelled to the passion of murder. Yet the anguish of the deed was lacking as Don José and Carmen stood embracing, with Carmen's feet firmly on the ground. Had he killed her? She remained so erect. We couldn't see her face. A better-directed finale was wanting, even for a concert performance.

As the famous toreador Escamillo, Mariusz Kwiecien, didn't disappoint. Again, his top failed to match the density of his sumptuous middle, but he is young and should be able to develop his instrument so that his vocal opulence spreads from pole to pole.

As Micaëla, soprano Jessica Rivera sang with poise, grace and vocal purity. Karen Vuong (Frasquita) and Fiona Murphy (Mercédès) sang with charm. Ryan McKinny (Zuniga), Daniel Teadt (Moralès), Philippe Castagner (El Dancaïro) and Daniel Montenegro (El Remendado) rounded out the cast, simply blending in.

Void of subtitles, conductor Bramwell Tovey's lively storytelling brought a sparkle to the evening. He directed the Los Angeles Philharmonic with decorum. The Pacific Chorale and Los Angeles Children's Chorus added to the event. A smaller venue would have brought out the orchestral and choral grandeur. Or possibly more attention to sound checks and amplification details would have made for a better effect.

Although somewhat uneven in sound, the singers had their moments, and nothing beats the Hollywood Bowl on a summer's eve.

Conductor: Bramwell Tovey

Artistic Director, Pacific Chorale: John Alexander

Artistic Director, Los Angeles Children's Chorus: Anne Tomlinson