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Nebrebko and Villazón Sizzle in LA Opera's Razzle-Dazzle 'Manon.'

**JULES MASSENET
MANON
LOS ANGELES OPERA
OCTOBER 21, 2006**

By: Carol Jean Delmar
OperaOnline.us

Opening night at the opera can be electric. Many of those in the audience are fashionably dressed, some in long gowns and tuxedos anxiously awaiting a new production as yet unseen. The singers are often insecure and don't know what to anticipate. Will the audience and critics like what they hear and see? Will the orchestra, voices, lights, sets and staging come together?

But closing nights are different. Everything is as polished as it's going to get, and the final performances become the singers' last hurrah, which was indeed the case on Sat., Oct. 21 when Anna Netrebko and Rolando Villazón made their final appearances in LA Opera's new dazzling production of Jules Massenet's "Manon." The singers sang with heated passion and milked their final curtain call. Their camaraderie was felt throughout the Dorothy Chandler Pavilion.

Based on a novel by Abbé Prévost and first performed by the Opéra-Comique in 1884, "Manon" was meant to be a very period piece set in 1720s Paris and its environs. Lescart is worried about his young, naïve, beautiful, somewhat unpredictable cousin, Manon, and he intends to place her in a convent; but she meets the Chevalier des Grieux, falls in love, and the two run off to Paris. Manon soon betrays her young lover for the wealthier de Brétigny, but then seeks forgiveness and goes back to des Grieux. The end is tragic. Des Grieux and Manon, his accomplice, are accused of cheating at cards. Des Grieux's father facilitates his son's release from prison, but the lower-class Manon is sentenced to deportation. When Manon is finally reunited with des Grieux, her health has vastly deteriorated, and she dies in her lover's arms.

In LA Opera's new production of "Manon," the score has been trimmed, and the story is updated to the 1950s. The sets and costumes are eye-catching, and the date alteration works to a T.

Villazón and Netrebko first sang together in Los Angeles a couple of years ago in LA Opera's production of Gounod's "Roméo et Juliette," then went on to worldwide fame as the "love" couple because of their onstage chemistry. But the phenomenon is not really about chemistry. It's more about two singer-actors who pour so much energy into their roles that the audience is able to feel their spirit. Netrebko and Villazón give every tone and movement their all. It is evident that they have both studied dancing, because they have the ability to float effortlessly across the stage, or to simply move an arm or leg so that it becomes part of a choreographed dance. Their vocal production is excellent, but for these two singers, it's not just about the voice. We are taken in by the entire package: their singing, beauty, acting, stage presence and movement.

Although Netrebko's voice charged like the Light Brigade over the orchestra on Saturday night, she seemed to attack some of her tones with reckless abandon. A few were slightly flat, thus necessitating her to raise them to their preordained pitch. Although some of her soaring notes might have been rounder, her high E was right at its center. From her pillow fight in Act 2 to her last-dying utterances in Act 5, she displayed an uninhibitedness that enabled her to add extra dimension to her portrayal. Her "Adieu, notre petite table" and her "Je marche sur tous les chemins" were sung with warmth and grace; her pianissimos radiated beauty; and her final duet with des Grieux was intense. She was captivating, yet her beauty and acting prowess sometimes detracted from our ability, as an audience, to focus on her vocality, musicianship and artistry. Her Manon was superficial, lacked depth, and she never revealed that she was actually living the character from within, yet she still developed a vibrant portrayal.

Everything about this production was theatrical and visual. We were reminded of Audrey Hepburn when Netrebko opened a magazine that displayed the actress's face on the cover. First Netrebko was Audrey Hepburn, or maybe Pamela Tiffin in "State Fair"; next she was a reincarnation of Gina Lollobrigida in "Trapeze"; and then she was Marilyn Monroe. But could she sing? We thought so, but we didn't care. Yet this is opera, and I wanted Anthony Minghella to turn it into a movie with Louis Jourdan and Leslie Caron -- maybe in the future.

Villazón was a little less trapped in the directorial concept, probably because his gestures and movements seemed less choreographed and more natural. His "En fermant les yeux" would have been greatly improved if Netrebko had refrained from moving objects on the table where she was sitting next to him. Her actions detracted from the audience's focus on Villazón. He seemed to be singing *mézza voce* at times, especially in the earlier acts, but then he sang with full voice later on. Anchored firmly to the ground with strong support, he sang splendid tones that vibrated in the mask and rang out into the hall.

Able to bask in the glow of Netrebko and Villazón, Hyung Yun's Lescaut was quite

noteworthy. His voice was mellow and he was a strong presence on the stage. At times he overacted into the caricature category, but he was an asset to the lively production.

Likewise, bass-baritone David Pittsinger was a commanding Count des Grieux who lent an air of dignity and maturity to the onstage proceedings, especially when he attempted to dissuade his son, des Grieux, from entering the priesthood. Dale Travis' performance as de Brétigny was adequate but unmemorable, and Ryland Davies as Guillot de Morfontaine could have been more unappealing.

The orchestra was directed with precision by Plácido Domingo who drew the appropriate amount of attention to the orchestral motifs, supported the spoken dialogue, and beautifully contrasted music such as the Cours-la-Reine scene with the passionate romantic phrasing later on.

THE PRODUCTION:

To a great degree, director-choreographer Vincent Paterson was responsible for the success of this production. Singers are often left to determine many of their own actions, but in this "Manon," movements and even hand gestures seemed to have been planned out and choreographed: Netrebko's pillow fight with Villazón on a gigantic Act 2 bed, her swiveling pole dancing, her "Cat on a Hot Tin Roof" moves on the apron of the stage, and even the strategic placement of the letter in the erotic letter sequence. Not a moment was left unattended to. Maybe this cast needed some freedom.

The sets designed by Johannes Leiacker were creative and tasteful and were often moved on and off the stage by what appeared to be supernumeraries: the railway station where Manon and des Grieux first met, their flat in Paris, the church with cathedral bars across the stage, the brightly lit gambling hall, and the symbolic jailhouse.

Susan Hilferty designed some elaborate and interesting costumes, especially for Netrebko, who first looked like a young gamin with a French red beret, then a sex kitten, then a woman of the world, then a Marilyn Monroe clone, and finally a jailbird.

This production was all spectacle and show, and most of the audience members lapped it up. But when des Grieux carried Manon's lifeless body into the glaring sunset, I knew that I'd had a little too much.

Conductor, Plácido Domingo
Director/Choreographer, Vincent Paterson
Scenery Designer, Johannes Leiacker
Costume Designer, Susan Hilferty
Lighting Designer, Duane Schuler
Concertmaster, Stuart Canin
Chorus Master, William Vendice



Anna Netrebko and Rolando Villazón