

**On the eve of 9/11, LA Opera's new dazzling production of 'Don Carlo' fit the bill.**



Ferruccio Furlanetto as Philip II. Photo: Robert Millard

**GIUSEPPE VERDI  
DON CARLO  
LOS ANGELES OPERA  
SEPTEMBER 10, 2006**

By: Carol Jean Delmar

The music in Verdi's "Don Carlo" is so melodic, regal and grand that it is impossible to purge it from one's mind for days after hearing it. James Conlon's exuberance in the pit at the opening matinee of LA Opera's new production of "Don Carlo" on Sunday, Sept. 10 seemed to spark the musicians and singers on the stage of the Dorothy Chandler Pavilion to give it their all. They were clearly watching his every move, and he was in control of them in a very positive way. The ensemble cast delivered, the sets were modern and imaginative, and the lavish costumes delighted the eye.

"Don Carlo" is a long, complicated historical opera even though LA Opera has staged the shorter four-act version without the Fontainebleau scene, which places Don Carlo, Prince of Spain, in the forest of Fontainebleau to catch a glimpse of his betrothed, the Princess of France, Elisabeth de Valois. The two fall in love. And even though the act is often eliminated, what has happened between them is never forgotten.

Verdi's "Don Carlo" is based on Friedrich von Schiller's play of the same name. The first 1867 version had a libretto in French; the 1884 revision became a shortened Italian translation. The action takes place in Spain in the sixteenth century at the time of the Spanish Inquisition. Due to the political climate between France and Spain, instead of marrying Don Carlo, Elisabeth marries his father, King Philip II, instead. Carlo seeks refuge in a monastery in Madrid where he is greeted by his friend, Rodrigo, Marquis of Posa, who entreats him to go to the Netherlands to help restore religious and economic freedoms for the Flemish, then oppressed by Spanish rule. The two subplots intertwine. Carlo loves Elisabeth who is married to his father. He is inconsolable, and his father is suspicious. At the same time, Rodrigo, or simply Posa as he is often called, has a strong

bond with Carlo and beseeches him to help free the persecuted Protestants in Flanders against his father's wishes, since Spain embraces Catholicism. Egged on by the Grand Inquisitor, Philip, who appears the consummate villain, is willing to sacrifice members of his own family rather than deal with the incongruities in his personal life or disavow the edicts of the Spanish Inquisition. It all becomes very complicated and full of intrigue. And toward the conclusion, Posa dies for his friend Carlo, thus spurring Carlo on to complete his friend's mission in Flanders.

The interesting symmetry of the four-act version is that the opera begins in the cloister of the Monastery of San Juste where a monk prays before the tomb of Emperor Charles V, and the opera ends in the same monastery when the Monk appears and leads Don Carlo into the darkness of the tomb. In some productions, Carlo is simply taken behind a grill in the monastery. The action occurs quickly in dim light and always leaves the audience a little startled and confused. The Monk appears to be and sounds like Charles V. Is he a friar? Or is he the spirit of the deceased Holy Roman Emperor who is emerging to save his grandson from the clutches of the Spanish Inquisition? No one knows for sure.

#### THE CAST

Verdi has written wonderful music for each of the six main characters. The music is so grand that any one of the singers could appear to be the star, or all of them could simply blend together to form an ensemble. On Sept. 10, renowned bass Ferruccio Furlanetto as King Philip II stood out above the rest. His "Ella giammai m'amò" was exquisite, beginning at first with deep introspection, then blooming into agonizing passion as he faced the reality that he had never won the Queen's heart. Not only was the quality of Furlanetto's voice lush, powerful and singular, but his secure physical presence dominated the stage as he literally inhabited the role. The others in this production were excellent for the most part, but they were visibly acting and occasionally stiff or in need of more blocking to camouflage their insecurities. Furlanetto, on the other hand, seemed aware of the impact that even a fine movement could make. The raising of a hand, even a finger; a solid stare – it was these subtle actions that defined his success in creating the intensity that was communicated to the onstage characters and audience as well. Furlanetto has sung for the most part only at the Met and with San Diego Opera in the United States. Here's hoping that he returns to LA to display his immense talent and voice in other prominent roles. He is a great bass.

In 2002 when Salvatore Licitra replaced Luciano Pavarotti as Cavaradossi in Puccini's "Tosca" at the Met, he was hailed as a potential successor. A number of the new crop of tenors have been given similar prophecies, but so far, no one tenor has reached that stature. What is certain about Licitra, however, is that on Sept. 10, he sang some very focused ringing high tones with a great deal of strength and passion. His "Io la vidi" and duets with Elisabeth and Posa supported that claim.

His partner in crime, baritone Lado Ataneli as Posa, did not fair as well even though he was an audience-pleaser. He had the opportunity to showcase his mellow voice when vowing eternal friendship to Carlo in Act I, and then before his death in Act III with "Per

me giunto è il di supremo” and “Io morirò.” Although he sang with ample support, at times his tones seemed slightly below the notes, and he seemed to be pushing.

Soprano Annalisa Raspagliosi as Elisabeth sang impressively with pure tonal quality and solid technique, but her chemistry with Carlo was somewhat lacking. A little more business assigned by director Ian Judge might have improved the situation. Raspagliosi’s voice had a natural warmth which, as her experience grows, will hopefully develop into warmth with a soul.

Mezzo-soprano Dolora Zajick’s voice has retained its power but was strident on the higher notes and lacked purity on the pianissimos although her lower chesty tones have retained their luster. As Princess Eboli, her “Veil Song” could have been more enthralling; her “O don fatale,” more dynamic.

Eric Halfvarson’s Grand Inquisitor and James Creswell’s Monk were strong. Too bad we couldn’t have heard more of Creswell, and seen more of him, too. When he stood onstage during the curtain call, I had the feeling that the audience had absolutely no idea what role he had played. Maybe in the coming years they will become more aware of his talent.

#### THE PRODUCTION

John Gunter’s sets were innovative and interesting. There was actually only one basic set which consisted of numerous arches that were moved, actually rolled on casters, to present different configurations and locales. Objects like a gigantic crucifix were dropped or rolled in. The simplicity of the set design coupled with various hues of light, often reds, drew attention to the singers and costumes rather than to the sets, which were timeless. Costuming was the vehicle used to determine the period. Tim Goodchild’s gorgeous black gowns added to the vision.

During the scene in the square when the heretics condemned by the Inquisition were about to be burned, Verdi’s regal music coupled with a large chorus and supernumeraries made for a magnificent spectacle.

Spain’s victimization of the Flemish people in the sixteenth century was no different than the terrorism and persecution that exists today between different ethnicities and religious groups. It was very fitting for LA Opera to produce “Don Carlo” this season when there is so much unrest in the world, to remind us of the unbecoming qualities inherent in human nature that lead to the violence we are attempting to eradicate.

Conductor, James Conlon

Director, Ian Judge

Set Design, John Gunter

Costume Design, Tim Goodchild

Lighting Design, Duane Schuler

Concertmaster, Stuart Canin

Chorus Master, William Vendice