

METROPOLITAN OPERA, OCTOBER 2018

On two successive days, I saw two of the grandest spectacles of grand opera:

Camille Saint-Saens SAMSON ET DELILAH

Giuseppe Verdi AIDA

SAMSON & DALILAH



This was a new production starring superstars French tenor Roberto Alagna and Latvian mezzo Elina Garanča. She was in excellent voice – wonderfully resonant chest tones, where most of this role is written. Throughout, her performance was at the pinnacle of the mezzo's art.

The tenor started out rather weakly – nothing technically wrong with his singing, just didn't seem to have much passion in his attempts to rouse the Hebrews to revolt in Act I. He warmed up in Act II, and did a credible job in the seduction scene, where Garanča really excelled. And then in Act III – an announcement was made that he could not continue

the performance, and a substitute was announced: Gary(?) Bennett. Perhaps he was known to most of the audience, because that was greeted with warm applause.

No reason was given – perhaps Alagna was injured at the end of Act II, where Samson is captured by Philistine soldiers, thrown to the ground and pummeled.

The substitute acquitted himself admirably in the initial scene of Act III, where he appears solo chained to a millstone, but he faded in the later crowd scenes with full ensemble and orchestra at full blare.

And the ensemble – in Act I, the choral singing was phenomenal. That chorus is a national treasure!

The role of the Old Hebrew was sung by Ukrainian bass Dmitry Belosselsky, with an amazingly rich, full-bodied voice. It is a small part which did not give him much opportunity to shine, but more about him in Aida.

Convention has it that Delilah is supposed to be torn between her true love for Samson and her duty as a Philistine priestess to deliver him to her people. That is not how I perceived this performance. She seemed single-minded in her duty throughout. The implied backstory was that they were an item in the past, but he threw her over when he got religion, and as the proverbial scorned woman she unleashed the fury that hell hath not.

The production, by Swiss designer Alexander Dodge, was opulent, with ziggurat-like structures in Act I, a luxurious apartment for Dalilah in Act II, and, in Act III, a dank dungeon and then a temple with a multi-story figure of the god Dagon, made of latticework over which dancers climbed in the Bacchanale.

Speaking of which – it was staged more homoerotically than erotically, with few female dancers and the males putting on some lewd moves.

The finale was a disappointment. In spite of the realistic portrayal up to that point, the destruction of the temple was staged in allegory. Samson broke out of his chains, smoke drifted down from the flies, but nothing came tumbling down. This is contrast to the previous production I saw some 40 years ago at Chicago's Lyric Opera – I don't remember the singers, but I remember the spectacular effect when the whole set came crashing down!

AIDA

Anna Netrebko at her best, a terrific Amneris, male roles sung, for the most part, excellently, a spectacular stage design – what's not to like?



I first heard Netrebko 11 years ago in Bellini's *I Puritani*, and was greatly impressed, although I found her voice somewhat light – at the lighter end of a lyric soprano. Since then, she has matured wonderfully, her voice has acquired a darker timbre and significant weight, where now she is easily in the dramatic range. And despite the added vocal weight, her voice maintained the suppleness and phenomenal dynamic range that I remember from then – the ability to instantly and effortlessly modulate from pianissimo to fortissimo.

Her initial aria, "Ritorna vincitor," was dazzling. In the Nile scene, her plaintive "O patria mia," although vocally perfect was, for my taste, done just a shade too spinto – it needed more delicacy. Which she proved quite capable of providing – in the final duet with Radames in the tomb scene, she projected just the right mix of power and delicacy. Bottom line: in her portrayal of the title role, for a second day in a row, I heard an artist performing at the pinnacle of her art.

At first I had reservations about Georgian mezzo Anita Rachvelishvili as Amneris, the daughter of the Pharaoh who is promised in marriage to Radames. Although supposedly a superstar, her voice seemed weak at the outset, especially in scenes with Aida where she paled against Netrebko's vocal heft. But she improved as the work progressed, and was truly amazing in the final act, especially in her emotional outbursts during the judgment scene, where she pleads for mercy for Radames despite his abandonment of her for Aida.

Radames, sung by Latvian tenor Aleksandrs Antonenko, was very good, but not quite up to the excellence of the other male roles. His "Celeste Aida," although quite good, received only tepid applause.

The other male roles were consistently excellent. Bass Dmitry Belosselsky, appearing for a second successive night after his role in Samson, was outstanding as High Priest Ramfis. Here his wonderful instrument could be fully displayed. American baritone Quinn Kelsey, as Amonasro, Aida's father and King of Ethiopia, sang magnificently, with a full, rich voice that was a perfect complement to Netrebko's. Virginia native Ryan Speedo Green sang the bass role of the Pharaoh beautifully. Overall, of the four male parts, three were outstanding and a joy to hear.

As always at the Met, the chorus was spectacular in all of its several massed appearances – notably in the triumphal scene, but no less so in the first act's ensemble version of "Ritorna vincitor" which precedes Aida's solo aria, and in the following temple scene (pictured).

The staging did full justice to the work's reputation as the grandest of the grand. Monumental sets depicting huge figures of gods and pharaohs rose into the flies and sank below the stage, revealing more monumental structures behind them. The triumphant procession was truly extravagant – hordes of soldiers carrying spears, swords, bows, riding live horses. No proverbial elephants, but Radames rode in on a horse-drawn chariot. (I'm always amazed at live horses in opera – being such high-strung and skittish animals, I'm surprised they don't bolt at the blare of brass and thumping of drums.) The set for the Nile scene was lushly green, belying Aida's inducement of Radames to flee with her from this "arid land" to the lush green valleys of her homeland.

One quibble with the staging: the judgment scene was played off-stage, with Amneris alone at stage center. On the one hand, the audience could readily focus on her expressions of tormented emotions, which sometimes get lost if she is at the periphery of a crowd scene. On the other, this staging missed the opportunity for one more visual spectacle, and more significantly, Ramfis' stentorian bass was rather muffled.

Overall, this easily ranks as one of the most memorable operatic performances I have ever experienced – it was almost a transcendental experience.