

Washington Opera's *Norma* was quite a successful production, mainly due to the singers. Although I was not as impressed with soprano Hasmik Papian as was the Post's reviewer, she was alright. There was absolutely nothing wrong with her performance, but unfortunately "nothing wrong" does not make for the most thrilling operatic moments. The signature aria "Casta Diva" was less than spectacular, as if she was holding back – we were expecting vocal fireworks, but got "nothing wrong." Admittedly, it is the start of a long and arduous evening for the lead, and she did warm up later, providing some dramatic singing. The highlight of the evening was the singing of Russian mezzo Irina Mishura as Adalgisa. Mezzos have been known to upstage lead sopranos on many occasions – many an Aducena in *Trovatore*, and most famously Stefania Toczyska as Jane Seymour, whom we heard at the Lyric in Chicago singing rings around Joan Sutherland in Donizetti's *Anna Bolenna*. Here, the soprano-mezzo balance was much better, and their duets were easily the best part of the performance.

In an opera featuring women, typically the tenor need do no more than show up (as in *Don Giovanni*, or *Lucia di Lamermoor*, or Donizetti's *Queens trilogy*), but here Canadian Richard Margison was quite impressive – a smooth, very powerful voice. We hope to hear more of him. Bass-baritone Kyle Ketelsen, as *Norma's* father, was also very good.

The production suffers from the location – a theater not built for opera. The layout is backwards – first the thrust stage (audience on 3 sides), then the proscenium with a scrim, and the orchestra behind that. The singers are thus performing with their backs to the orchestra & conductor, but there are numerous TV monitors showing him. The orchestra sounded a little muffled on occasion. Set design consisted of a raised platform above the orchestra, and projections on the scrim. Not too exciting – but it did allow one to concentrate on the singing, which is what this opera is all about. The music is absolutely gorgeous. Given the credit that Bellini is given for influencing Romantic music, including Chopin, I was surprised to learn that he wrote only 11 operas (died at age 33).

This is the first time we have seen *Norma*, and all in all, it was a satisfactory experience. In the spring, we see three more productions, but thankfully back at the Opera's home in the opera-friendly Kennedy Center.