



Emotional Storms: Verdi's *Otello* at Vancouver Opera

by Paul Budra. Written on 2017-11-17. Published in 2017 Issue 2.

For the production: *Otello* (2017, The O'Brian Centre for Vancouver Opera, Canada). See production details at the end of the review.

VANCOUVER OPERA MOUNTED A FOUR-NIGHT PRODUCTION OF GIUSEPPE VERDI'S *OTELLO* IN MAY of 2017 as part of its Vancouver Opera Festival, ten days of celebration around three operas all performed at the Queen Elizabeth Theatre: *Otello*, *Dead Man Walking*, and *The Marriage of Figaro*. The *Otello* production was the largest of the three employing a full 65-piece orchestra under the direction of British conductor Jonathan Darlington. This was one of the most ambitious productions ever undertaken by Vancouver Opera and one of its most successful.

Otello was Verdi's penultimate opera (the last was *Falstaff*). Verdi had entered a self-imposed retirement after completing his opera *Aida* in 1871, but he was a Shakespeare enthusiast and the possibility of composing an opera based on *Othello* drew him back to work in 1884. He completed the opera in 1886 with a libretto by Arrigo Boito. The opera was musically innovative: the arias, recitatives (simply sung passages that mimic natural speech), and ensemble pieces blended together creating a continuous musical soundscape reminiscent of Richard Wagner's work. One of the more technically demanding operas in Verdi's catalogue, it premiered in 1887 and received 20 curtain calls.

Verdi's four-act version of Shakespeare's story is highly condensed, taking place entirely in Cyprus. The Vancouver production reminded the audience of the Venetian portion of the *Othello* story by projecting a huge image of the winged lion of St. Mark, the symbol of Venice, set against a dark sea and ominous clouds, on the scrim before the opera began.

The main characters are also simplified. Iago's motivations in the opera are clear: he declares to Rodrigo that he hates *Otello* because the general has promoted Cassio before him. There is no mention of Iago's sexual jealousy. In the second act, Iago declares himself a nihilist who believes that there is nothing after death and that mankind is innately vicious. He takes the Desdemona's handkerchief away from Emilia by brute force. At the end of the opera, when he is caught, he says nothing, not even "From this time forth I will never speak word." Verdi's Iago, then, is a conventional villain, a motivated malignity.

Canadian baritone Gregory Dahl made a striking Iago. Dressed in black, his head shaven, he often stood still while members of the chorus flowed around him. A head taller than the singer playing Otello, his Iago dominated Otello physically. At the end of Act 3, when Otello fell into a swoon, Iago stood over him, threatening to step on the Moor's head, then sat in Otello's abandoned chair of state to gloat. In his interactions with American tenor John Cudia's handsome and guileless Cassio, he was genial and charming, while delivering vicious asides to the audience.

Italian tenor Antonello Palombi as Otello was the vocal highlight of the show. His voice was consistently strong through what is one of the most demanding male roles in Verdi. His acting, however, lacked refinement. He often seemed to be playing to the back rows, making his gestures needlessly large and, at times, clichéd. His favorite stage movements were a dazed stumble and an impatient shrugging away of characters standing near him. Perhaps the most interesting thing about this performance is that Palombi is white. Race has been an issue in productions of Shakespeare's *Othello* since at least the 1940s when Paul Robeson reclaimed the role for black actors in America as a statement of civil rights. To have a white actor play Shakespeare's character in blackface makeup is virtually unthinkable now. The opera makes fewer references to race than does Shakespeare's play, but the character is still called a foreigner and a moor. The director wisely avoided makeup and signified Otello's exoticism through elaborately long hair, beard, and the ornate robes. For the most part, this was effective enough, but Palombi's relatively small size and awkwardness when wielding a sword did not make him convincing as a great warrior. When he killed himself he seemed more a heartbroken teenage lover than a man proclaiming his martial self-worth.

Canadian soprano Erin Wall as Desdemona was convincing and moving. Again, the role is much less nuanced than in Shakespeare. Verdi's Desdemona is not allowed any wit and her saintliness is emphasized by two added scenes: in Act 2 the citizens of Cyprus pay tribute to her beauty and virtue with song and gifts of flowers; in the bedroom scene, Desdemona sings a prayer to the Virgin Mary and asks Emilia to put her bridal gown, not the sheets, on her bed. Otello strangles her with that dress. The Christian imagery was emphasized in this production by the crucifixes that both Wall and Palombi wore. Just before the murder, Palombi tore his off in a gesture reminiscent of Laurence Olivier's in his 1965 film version of *Othello*. As Emilia, Canadian mezzo-soprano Megan Latham was a mother figure to the grieving Desdemona. (The roles of Roderigo and Bianca are minimized in the opera and barely registered in performance.)

Good use was made of the striking set, large stone blocks that, in the first two acts, represented the dockyards of Cyprus. Chains tangled from the sky, perhaps suggesting the web that Iago

was spinning to trap Otello. In the final act, high-placed windows and stonewalls created a bedroom that looked like a tomb or a cell. Perhaps the most visually striking moments came in Act 1. In the opening moments of the opera, a chorus of Cyprus's citizens stared into the house and described a ship being tossed in a storm. Iago was there, hoping that the storm would dash Otello's ship. A film of a raging sea was projected on the set and actors. Later in Act 1 a number of Cyprus's citizens gathered around a fire and to cast shadows on the wall behind them, acting out exaggerated domestic scenes. The final one was a slapstick version of marital infidelity and revenge. Not the subtlest foreshadowing, but effective nonetheless.

Some years ago, I saw a production of Verdi's *Macbeth* at the Vancouver Opera that was so bad (the chorus of witches seemed to have escaped from some kitsch-costumed Ice Capages extravaganza). I left at the intermission. This production of *Otello*, despite some over-sized acting, was the best opera production that I have seen in Vancouver both musically and visually. It marks a new level of achievement for Vancouver Opera.

Production Details

General

<i>Title</i>	Otello
<i>Year</i>	2017
<i>Theater Company</i>	The O'Brian Centre for Vancouver Opera
<i>Theaters</i>	Queen Elizabeth Theatre (Canada)
<i>Start Date</i>	2017-04-28
<i>End Date</i>	2017-05-06

Cast

LODOVICO	THOMAS GOERZ
OTHELLO	ANTONELLO PALOMBI
CASSIO	JOHN CUDIA
IAGO	GREGORY DAHL
RODERIGO	MARTIN SADD
MONTANO	ANGUS BELL
DESDEMONA	ERIN WALL
EMILIA	MEGAN LATHAM
HERALD	GLENN DE VERTEUIL

Creatives

DIRECTOR	MICHAEL CAVANAGH
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LIGHTING DESIGNER	GERALD KING
SCENIC & PROJECTION DESIGNER	ERHARD ROM
CONDUCTOR	JONATHAN DARLINGTON
CHORUS DIRECTOR	KINZA TYRRELL