

Short operas continue company's comeback Thursday, February 2, 2006

BY CHANNING GRAY Journal Arts Writer

Opera Providence continues its return to fully staged opera this weekend with a couple of Italian one-acts. Tomorrow night and Sunday afternoon at the Columbus Theatre, the company stages Mascagni's ever-popular *Cavalleria Rusticana*, along with Puccini's lesser-known *Suor Angelica*. The productions will be sung in Italian with English supertitles flashed over the stage. There'll be sets and costumes, but no orchestra. Music director Timothy Steele will play the orchestral parts on the piano, which will work in most cases except for the famed *Intermezzo* from *Cavalleria*, where the strings should tear your heart out.

This is the second fully staged production of the season for Opera Providence, after taking a couple of years to regroup and deal with its debts. The first, *Hansel and Gretel*, looked a little amateurish, despite a couple of strong voices. Hopefully, the company has improved its lot with this double bill.

Executive director Loriana De Crescenzo is singing the praises of the Armenian-American soprano Nouné Karapetian, who is stepping in for the internationally acclaimed singer Maria Spacagna in the role of Sister Angelica. Spacagna, who lives in Rhode Island and spends most of her time teaching, contracted a virus a few months ago, said DeCrescenzo, and didn't feel ready to tackle the part.

Karapetian is one of Spacagna's star students, said De Crescenzo. She said Spacagna has been coaching her for the role. Karapetian, who made her debut in Armenia, now lives in Belmont, Mass., and has performed a lot with smaller groups in the New England area, including the Greater New Bedford Choral Society and the Granite State Opera in New Hampshire. "I'm, glad we can catch her while we can," said De Crescenzo, "before she goes off to a bigger company. "Her voice just soars. It's very easy for her."

SUPPORTING ROLES IN *Suor Angelica* will be sung by Lithuanian mezzo Danute Mileika, who has sung a lot in Boston, and Japanese soprano Meena Malik.

Suor Angelica, or *Sister Angelica*, has never been one of Puccini's more successful operas. Only Angelica's lament, "Senza mamma," is on a par with some of the composer's other arias. Angelica, the daughter of a noble Florentine family, joins a convent after having a child out of wedlock. One day she is visited by her aunt and told that the child has died. Grief-stricken, Angelica prepares to kill herself. As she drinks poison, she prays to the Virgin Mary that she will not die in mortal sin, and at that point sees a vision of the Virgin leading a child toward her. An invisible chorus sings of salvation as she dies.

Cavalleria, by comparison, is a much stronger opera, tight, intense, compact. It all takes place one Easter morning when Santuzza, a village girl, tells the teamster Alfio that his wife Lola has been cheating on him with Santuzza's ex-boyfriend, Turiddu. Revenge is certain and swift. "It's got passion, fights, and someone dies," said De Crescenzo. "It's meaty Italian opera that people love." The four principal leads are all Rhode Islanders. Tenor Frederic Scheff fills the role of the unfaithful Turiddu; Cranston dramatic soprano Janette Lallier, the mother in Opera Providence's Hansel and Gretel, is Santuzza; popular baritone Rene de la Garza sings the part of Alfio, and Kara Lund is Lola. There will also be a 16-voice chamber chorus for Cavalleria, said DeCrescenzo.

DeCRESCENZO IS COUNTING on a couple of short operas appealing to an audience that doesn't want to spend hours sitting through Il Trovatore or some such opera. These two brief one-acts are like watching a couple of TV shows, she said, each under 50 minutes. "I'm hoping it will encourage more people to stop in the theater, to say, 'Okay, it won't take me all night.'" Steele, the music director, is new for this production. He's taught for 14 years at New England Conservatory and worked with Boston Lyric Opera. "He's very thorough," said DeCrescenzo. "Everything is very well prepared."

DeCrescenzo said that the company will have to rely this season on a piano for the accompaniment, but is hoping to afford a small orchestra next season.

"It's a work in progress," she said of the company.

Performances of Suor Angelica and Cavalleria Rusticana take place tomorrow at 8 p.m. and Sunday at 3 p.m. at the Columbus Theatre, 270 Broadway, Providence. Tickets range from \$15 to \$50 and are available by calling (401) 621-6123 or by visiting www.arttixri.com.

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