

Titans of Opera, Christina Major: Cup Runneth Over

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By Steve Osborn



For its “Titans of Opera” program at the Green Music Center in Rohnert Park, the Santa Rosa Symphony assembled a titanic cast of players — a full orchestra; an additional contingent of brass, woodwind, and student players; an 80-voice chorus; and two soloists. Monday’s concert was long and the pieces were many, but in the end, a solitary musician stole the show: the rising American soprano **Christina Major**.

If your name is your destiny, this powerful singer will have a major career. She brings a remarkable collection of skills to the task at hand: a powerful voice, excellent diction, a well-controlled vibrato, a stratospheric range, an expressive delivery, and an imposing stage presence. All she needs is time, and perhaps a lucky break, before she ascends to Bayreuth or La Scala.

Those two opera houses are closely identified with the evening’s featured composers: Wagner and Verdi, in that order. The first half of Monday’s performance was entirely devoted to orchestral interludes from Wagner’s “Ring” cycle, and the second half to overtures, choruses, and arias from selected Verdi operas. The combination was revelatory. Wagner, with his recurring leitmotifs and painterly orchestration, is a delight for the mind, whereas Verdi’s indelible melodies and ineluctable narratives go straight to the heart.

In the Wagner half of the concert, Music Director Bruno Ferrandis conveyed with his baton that the audience was *not* to applaud between pieces, thereby transforming the selections into a seven-movement “Ring Cycle suite,” with one interlude from *Das Rheingold*, two from *Die Walküre*, one from *Siegfried*, and three from *Götterdämmerung*. Listeners lacking the stamina or inclination to endure all four operas could get a good idea of their essence just by listening to these well-chosen excerpts.

The virtual suite began with the “Descent to Nibelheim” from *Das Rheingold*, which features murmuring strings and an extended crescendo that climaxes with imaginary dwarf blacksmiths pounding at anvils. From my wall-hugging side seat on the second floor of the Music Center, I couldn’t actually see the percussionists enacting the role of blacksmiths, but the effect was nonetheless riveting.

Next up was the famous “Ride of the Valkyries” from *Die Walküre*, known to millions of filmgoers as the helicopter music for *Apocalypse Now*. Despite the brisk tempos and the thunderous hordes of brass instruments, Ferrandis kept all his forces in check with remarkably spare movements, giving only the slightest indications for repeated crescendos and dramatic entrances. His basic modus operandi continued into “Wotan’s Farewell,” where he coaxed a tremendous sound from the trombones with a few slight motions of his left arm; less is more.

For all its drama, Wagner's music is oddly static. He is at his best when evoking a particular scene and then simply lingering, as in the ensuing "Forest Murmurs" from *Siegfried*. Here the lower strings offered a transcendent beginning, repeating a simple eight-note phrase to magical effect. The subsequent cello line was outstanding, as were the extended solos from a trio of veteran woodwind players: clarinetist Mark Wardlaw, flutist Kathleen Reynolds, and oboist Laura Reynolds.

With all those imaginary trees, "Forest Murmurs" is inevitably dominated by woodwinds and strings. Likewise, the three concluding interludes from *Götterdämmerung* are dominated by Siegfried's emblematic instrument, the French horn. In "Siegfried's Rhine Journey," one of the many horn players (they stretched so far to stage right that I couldn't see all of them) spirited his instrument offstage and offered a heroic solo. In "Siegfried's Death," the horns, including four so-called Wagner tubas, supplied a brooding and dark rendition of several by-now-familiar leitmotifs. And in "Brünnhilde's Immolation," the horns and everyone else within shouting distance joined together to bring the well-played suite to a fiery conclusion.

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The Verdi half of the show began with a spirited rendition of the overture to *Nabucco*, with a handful of student players from the Symphony's youth orchestra joining their elder colleagues. Nary a wrong note was to be heard, and many hitherto unobservant patrons seemed surprised when the young contingent stood up for a separate bow before leaving the stage.

Young musicians were even more prominent in the Symphony's Honor Choir, which sat patiently in the Choral Circle behind the stage during the first half. Seemingly composed mostly of Sonoma State students, the choir numbered about 30 sopranos, 30 altos, 20 basses, and a mere 6 tenors. (The university may need to recruit more higher-voiced young men to fill that gap.)

Despite the tenor imbalance, the choir performed admirably in both the "Slave Chorus" from *Nabucco* and the beloved "Anvil Chorus" from *Il trovatore*. They sang exuberantly, in excellent time with the orchestra. The a cappella section of the "Anvil Chorus" was especially well-done.

Subsequent to those choruses, the star of the show, soprano Christina Major, drifted onto the stage in a floor-length purple dress with many drapes and folds. From the very first note of "Tacea la notte" (also from *Il trovatore*), she asserted her irresistible presence. Although poorly lit (she would have benefited from a spotlight), she drew all eyes and ears with her confident high notes, impeccable coloratura, and expressive gestures.

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Tenor soloist Christopher Bengochea sounded weak by comparison. Singing "Di quella pira" from the same opera, he was by turns strident and overly dramatic. His middle and lower ranges were acceptable, but his higher notes verged on shouting. He was nonetheless a crowd-pleaser, gesturing repeatedly to the audience.

The “Triumphal March” from *Aida* followed, matching and even exceeding Wagner in brassiness, and then the tenor aria “Celeste Aida,” again more shouted than sung. Five selections from *La traviata* brought the show to a close, beginning with the delicately played Prelude to Act 1 and the fervently sung “Gypsy Chorus.”

The duet “Un di felice” offered a stark contrast between Bengochea’s stridency and Major’s gorgeous tone. Unlike their respective characters (Alfredo and Violetta), the two soloists never blended into a harmonious unit. Far better were the show-stopping “È strano” and “Sempre libera,” which flowed from Major’s lips in a torrent of emotion and bravura singing. Her phrasing was exquisite, and her high notes were superb.

Hoisting full wine glasses, the soloists ended the proceedings with a vivacious rendition of “Libiamo ne’ lieti calici” (Drink from the happy goblets). In Major’s case, her cup runneth over.

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