

Review

Opera Western Reserve: *Traviata* at Stambaugh Auditorium (November 12)

by Robert Rollin, *Cleveland Classical*



Opera Western Reserve's staged production of Verdi's *La Traviata* took place last Friday in Youngstown's beautiful Stambaugh Auditorium, and in the process demonstrated that the company has come of age, and that despite challenging economic times, the Arts are alive and flourishing in Youngstown. For this great and challenging *bel canto* opera to succeed, several elements must interact: fine singing of protagonists and choruses, good pacing and musical control, appealing staging and acting, and adequate sets, costumes and lighting. All these criteria were met by this fine production.

The part of courtesan Violetta Valery is the pivotal hub about which the other roles revolve. The flighty pleasure seeker must transform herself into a self-sacrificing, angelic martyr without invalidating the audience's suspension of disbelief. Jessica Stecklein's Violetta attained a remarkable authenticity, while avoiding melodramatic excess. She provided dignity, sincerity, and pathos to a role that when poorly acted can seem maudlin. Stecklein's singing was equally exceptional as she negotiated the more difficult coloratura runs with grace and ease. She is an experienced, consummate professional who lent the production the artistic luster it needed.

Timothy M. R. Culver's Alfredo was forcefully affecting, demonstrating the character's youthful frustration. However, his opening-act vocal quality seemed a bit strained. He subsequently relaxed a bit, and really excelled in the remaining acts.

Brian Keith Johnson's Giorgio Germont added the requisite rich, baritone color to the musical flow. His movements and gestures lent the part an air of authenticity. The lesser roles were well sung and acted as well.

Immediately from the opening prelude and its beautiful eightfold division of the violins, conductor/music director Susan Davenny Wyner (*above*) attained a fine sensitivity and rapport with the orchestra, imparting the music's expression with her graceful gestures. She never allowed the pace to drag, making sparkingly expeditious transitions from one moment to the next. It is, after all, Verdi's remarkable music that drives the opera to perfection. Beyond pacing, the orchestra never once overbalanced the singers--a rare thing in live opera performance. Though the reduced orchestral size due to financial constraints also contributed to good balance, it is clear that the instrumentalists, singers, and conductor forged an unusual musical bond.

Traviata's plethora of choruses have been stumbling blocks to many a production, but on this night, the music soared with strong and true harmony. Choral directors Hae- Jong Lee and Sue Ellen Harris-Davis clearly prepared their troops well. Staging and blocking was well-handled by the cast throughout, evidencing careful preparation by director David Vosburgh. In particular the Third Act scene with the gypsies and matadors was beautifully sung, danced and acted. The entire production really flowed well throughout.

Violetta's and Alfredo's extended Act I duet and its juxtaposition of themes was lovely, as was Violetta's glorious coloratura at the end of the act. Act II's scene between Violetta and Giorgio was equally effective. Act III flowed with remarkable precision, pacing and with excellent ensemble--no mean feat with the complexity of chorus parts, dance, and the beautiful ensemble finale. When a production shows as much cohesiveness, continuity, and artistic skill as this one, it must be labeled as truly exceptional.