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Maria Stuarda Is a Battle Royal at the Met Opera

David Sheward · Wednesday, February 10th, 2016

A cry of despair arose from the audience at the Metropolitan Opera when the stage manager appeared before the curtain rose on Donizetti's 1835 *Maria Stuarda* and announced that soprano Sondra Radvanovsky would still be playing the title role,e but that she had been suffering from a cold. No one need have worried. Though Radvanovsky's upper registers have a Callas-like acidity, she delivers an intense and passionate performance of the martyred monarch. She is scheduled to play the composer's additional Tudor monarchs in *Anna Bolena* and *Roberto Devereux* during the current Met season. Here she fiercely defines Mary's full-throated, proud demands for freedom and respect, and then shifts dramatic gears with a piteous and tearful confession scene before mounting an ominous stairway to the executioner.

Donizetti's lush score more than makes up for the historical inaccuracies of the libretto, based on Friedrich Schiller's play. Mary and Elizabeth, cousins vying for the English throne, never met in real life. But the central scene of both the play and the opera is a spectacular confrontation between the two with the elegant, saintly Mary calling out the more calculating Elizabeth as a bastard unfit to reign.

Celso Albelo, Sondra Radvanovsky, and Elza van der Heever in Donizetti's *Maria Stuarda* at the Metropolitan Opera.
Credit: Ken Howard

As Elizabeth, Elza van den Heever is as equally impressive as Radvanovsky, though David McVicar has directed her to move with the stiff limbs and clumsy gait of a sumo wrestler. This odd staging choice may have meant to portray Elizabeth as graceless and tough compared to the delicate and feminine Mary, or perhaps it was meant to conjure up an image of Elizabeth as a masculine, tyrannical ruler like her father Henry VIII. van den Heever overcomes this bizarre blocking choice with a sweet, clear soprano and an intense liming of the queen's inner conflict between her desire for power and jealousy for the courtier Leicester, who in this version yearns for Mary.

In his Met debut, Celso Albelo is a proficient Leicester, delivering a strong tenor line, but failing to convince us that two powerful rulers would be fighting for his romantic favors. Kwangchulk Youn is a commanding Talbot, Mary's ally in Elizabeth's court, and Patrick Carfizzi is appropriately dark and devilish as the implacable Burghley who advocates for Mary's death.

McVicar's powerful production puts the battling queens center stage in a bloody match-up. Designer John Macfarlane sets the appropriate brutal tone with a startling show curtain depicting a blood-soaked British lion and eagle roaring at the audience. Once that gigantic curtain raises, his sets and costumes have the right regal flair, illuminated by Jennifer Tipton's sensitive lighting for

this exciting diva fight.

Jan. 29—Feb. 20. Metropolitan Opera at Lincoln Center, 66th St. and Broadway, NYC. Repertory schedule. Running time: three hours including one intermission; $32—$480; (212) 362-6000 or www.metopera.org.

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