

Opera Magazine Article on Anoush Libretto by Micheal H.Margolin

Anoush, in its second full production by Michigan Opera Theatre in 20 years, was worth the major investment. The company had produced Armen Tigranian's opera (premiere: Alexandropol, 17 August 1912) first in 1981. Sung in English, *Anoush* was well supported by the Detroit area Armenian community. This time around, the intentions were different, loftier and -generally- achieved. The community raised \$400,000 from nearly 500 pledges garnered over two years.

The year 2001, the 1,700th anniversary of the Armenian state's adoption of Christianity, seemed an appropriate moment to revisit this work. The idea was also that MOT could now build a production for the new Detroit Opera House which might possibly be attractive to other houses of a similar size for rental. Surtitles meant the work could be sung in the original language. MOT also chose to find Armenian singers, conductor and producer to bring 'authenticity' to the work.

The plot, based on a poem by Houhannes Toumanina (libretto by G. Ya. Burkovich), is uncluttered. In the 19th-century Armenian village of Lori, Anoush lives under the shadow of a childhood curse that her true love will be cut down by a bullet; she is in love with Saro, a shepherd. At a village gathering, Saro inadvertently (though, in Gerald Papasian's staging, deliberately) betrays a taboo about defeating an opponent in wrestling and downs Anoush's brother, Mossy. Things fly and soon Anoush and Saro, unmarried, have run off. When Anoush returns to make peace with her brother and mother, Saro is shot dead and Anoush does a Tosca from a high cliff.

Act 1 is a longish affair with necessary exposition and musical portraits of village life; the music has a folk-melody appeal with some sophisticated coloration along the lines of, say, Rimsky-Korsakov. There is a women's chorus and some dancing. Act 2 continues along these lines, with little musical development or complexity, but Act 3, quite unexpectedly, brings forth a series of exciting arias and dramatic depth

in the music. Tigranian begins to resemble an artist more than a savvy folklorist with ambitions.

The major roles were taken, mostly, by singers of Armenian descent, and some parts were double cast. I saw the first cast (November 10). Hasmik Papian made an immediate impression in the title role: her voice is creamily smooth with exquisite *pianissimos*. The "Willow" aria in Act 1 is ballad-like but with a lilting melody; Papian endowed it with vitality and sentiment. Throughout, she was dramatically compelling. Yeghishe Manucharyan gave a pleasant swagger to his performance as Saro early on, becoming appropriately dour. His is a very bright tenor with an appealing vibrato. Yury Nechaev was physically stolid, which worked well for Mossy as a character; he possesses a vigorous bass-baritone. Each of the two mothers is required to portray the emotional brunt of the ensuing tragedy, and Barbara Bland and Nicole Philibosian were compelling. Saro's mother's lament upon her son's death was effective theatre and vocally memorable as performed by Philibosian. Raffi Armenian shaped the music with great devotion.

The production team of the conductor Raffi Armenian, producer Gerlad Papasian and set designer Franco Colavecchia were reunited from the 1981 premiere. A scrim of semi-abstract design was in place before Act 1. It depicted the rugged Armenian landscape with a strong palette - perhaps just a trifle garish. Colavecchia chose simplicity over complexity. Even the Ascension Day festival, with its Byzantine touches, did not seem fussy, but appropriate to that time and place. Melissa Bruning's costumes were neither quaint nor bland; women's dresses were in jewel tones, with dollops of fur for the men's costumes to suggest the agrarian and hunting society. This *Anoush* should not have to wait another 20 years or for another big anniversary to be seen again. MOT had opened the season with a new *Carmen* (seen on October 11) in partnership with Opera Pacific and Houston Grand Opera. Ron Daniels, who staged it, was credited with the concept. He saw *Carmen* as a 'fantasy of the South'. The set designer, Riccardo Hernandez, and costumer, Constance Hoffman, evoked the period of the 1940s and '50s, inspired by Sophis Loren and Gina Lollobrigida. Irina Mashura's chic,

sexy Carmen has been one of the Seven wonders since her debut in Michigan Opera Theatre's 1996-7 season. The Habanera was tossed off like a bagatelle, and consequently sounded fresh. Mishura was thrilling throughout, with the voice always perfectly placed, and her emotional coloration was as intense as the set's tones. But there was no getting away from the fact that this performance was less spontaneous, slightly more studied, than the debut. Don José was taken by Hugh Smith (alternating with Gerard Powers opposite Kate Aldrich). Tall and dark, he did not get anywhere close to Daniel's conception of a man with 'a violent and obsessive nature of a murderer'. His voice was attractive and he played off Carmen -but he remained grounded in perfunctory technique and with a voice that does not convey enough real feeling. Nicolle Foland as Micaela, however, unfolded like a rose, with natural, taut, affecting singing of her music. Kyle Ketelsen's Escamillo had panache. The conductor, John Demain, was at home with the *opéra-comique* style. Daniels (pronounced Don-ee-els -he's Brazillian) put a refreshed *Carmen* on the stage, musically vivid and generally good to look at. It pleased the eyes, the ears, yet the intellect felt cheated.

-Micheal H. Margolin