

Borodina ravishing in 'Samson'

By Allan Ulrich

CHRONICLE MUSIC CRITIC

Dalila's tonsorial parlor reopened for business at the War Memorial Opera House on Saturday evening, and the line starts here.

With its first revival in 18 years of Saint-Saëns' Old Testament epic, "Samson et Dalila," the San Francisco Opera, third time around, has come up with its first hit of the season, and it is the singing — gloriously voluptuous singing on the part of mezzo-soprano Olga Borodina — that makes it so. The venerable French composer's sex-and-sandal platitudes with all their Wagnerian ambiguity have never sounded so fresh.

Granted that the company surrounded Borodina with a wonderfully committed cast, a conductor who ultimately warms to the task and a 21-year-old production of enormously kitschy allure. But the woman gets the best music, and you can't honestly produce this work without casting the female role from strength. In the St. Petersburg-based artist, the



JOHN O'HARA / The Chronicle

REVIEW

OPERA

SAMSON ET DALILA: The San Francisco Opera will perform Saint-Saëns' opera at 8 p.m. tomorrow; 7:30 p.m. Friday, Oct. 3 and Oct. 6; 8 p.m. Oct. 9 and Oct. 12; and 2 p.m. Oct. 14 at the War Memorial Opera House, 201 Van Ness Ave., San Francisco. Tickets: \$23-\$165. Call (415) 864-3330 or visit www.sfopera.com.

company has recruited the Philistine temptress for our time. This is singing for a new golden age.

There will always be listeners who don't respond to the Borodina magic; for some, consummate good taste, her artistic credo, may be her undoing. The singer's exceptionally integrated instrument is capable of delivering howitzer chest tones and crystalline high notes, too. But Borodina never forces extremes

Olga Borodina, Sergej Larin (foreground) and René Pape in Saint-Saëns' "Samson et Dalila."

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to score a dramatic point, never neglects the seamless musical line. Legato, color, dynamic variety and a crafty way of dealing with the register break all draw a charmed circle around her artistry.

If her Act 1 entrance aria, "Printemps qui commence," seemed a bit diffident Saturday, the opening of Act 2, with Borodina garbed like a figure in a Gustave Moreau painting, yielded a lustrous "Amour! viens aider ma faiblesse," while the duet, "Mon coeur s'ouvre à ta voix," sustained an aura of focused sensuality.

Although Ferdinand Lemaire's libretto draws the line between heroes and sinners, Borodina's charismatic and patrician appeal, without a wasted gesture, blurs the demarcation. In savoring understatement, she approaches greatness. Borodina's future commitments to the San Francisco Opera are, reportedly, hazy. There is no better time than now.

Engaging Sergej Larin proved an immense stroke of good fortune. In his most winning appearance here, the Russian tenor found the glinting heroic heft for the opening act, yet he offered a most credibly smitten sinner in Dalila's digs. Yet it was as the blinded, enfeebled Samson ("Vois, ma misère, hélas") that Larin's exquisitely modulated vocalism, a portrait of humanity in extremis, transcended the opera's musty conventions.

Except for Scott Wilde's wobbly Abimélech, the team satisfied on all counts. Despite Carrie Robbins' Ming the Merciless costume, Timothy Noble's edgy, urgent baritone and superb French diction animated the High Priest of Dagon magisterially. René Pape's sonorous Old Hebrew served as a preview of this formidable young German bass' Pogner in "Die Meistersinger" next month.

Conductor Emmanuel Joel began the evening in a muddle of rhythmic sluggishness and thematic inertia. The Act 3 Bacchanale found him more responsive to the drama. Ian Robertson's Opera Chorus, notably the male complement, brought fervor to Act 1's interminable oratorio-like passages.

Director Sandra Bernhard has retained Nicolas Joël's original scheme without excessive tampering. Samson needs a more striking entrance in Act 1 (the score almost demands it), but the opulent Temple of Dagon and its stunning collapse add up to great good fun. Douglas W. Schmidt's imposing designs still impress.

And for this revival, everybody's favorite living ex-San Francisco Ballet co-director, Michael Smuin, has re-choreographed the Bacchanale. A sedate outing for six scantily clad couples engaged in strenuous contortionist routines, it earns no more than a G rating, G in this case standing for both Gaza and grind house.