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OPERA REVIEW; 'Aida' Offers Up Pavarotti In a Test of Time and Tempo

By ANTHONY TOMMASINI

No one should be surprised that for weeks opera chat rooms have been buzzing with speculation that Luciano Pavarotti's performances this month as Radames in Verdi's "Aida" at the Metropolitan Opera will be his last with the company. This beloved tenor is 65, an advanced age for an opera singer. He has long been troubled by physical problems that were only partly relieved by hip and knee surgery in 1998. And it's not as if Mr. Pavarotti has been an exemplar of discipline over the years.

On Monday night he sang the first of his five scheduled performances. For those of us who have thrilled to his past artistry and vocal splendor -- and that includes just about every opera fan of the last 30 years -- Mr. Pavarotti's performance was a sad spectacle. He got through it, but at times barely, and only with the indulgence of his colleagues.

In the soprano Deborah Voigt as Aida, the mezzo-soprano Olga Borodina as Amneris, and the baritone Mark Delavan making his Met debut as Amonasro, the Met had three splendid singers in their prime. But their work was hampered by the constant need to make musical allowances for Mr. Pavarotti. In the orchestra pit, James Levine was often reduced to the role of a time-keeper and cue-provider. Whenever Mr. Pavarotti was onstage, all the singers -- indeed, every player in Sonja Frisell's 1988 production -- seemed joined in an effort to prop him up.

No one expects a hefty elderly tenor to look like the young conquering leader of the Egyptian army. But he should at least sound heroic. When Mr. Pavarotti sang the first phrases of dramatic recitative that set up Radames's aria "Celeste Aida," there were flashes of that Pavarotti sound: warm, rich, husky, full of color. We may have to wait a long time for a tenor to come along who can match it. Mr. Pavarotti knows that, which is why it must be so hard for him to stop.

But once the aria actually began, his singing became quite insecure, and he must know that, too. The initial phrases sweep upward in a series of lyrical arcs to sustained top notes. He had trouble sustaining the line. Only someone with Mr. Levine's technique and sensitivity to singers could have followed Mr. Pavarotti's needs as his breath gave out in one phrase, or as he jumped a beat in the next.

Mr. Pavarotti's glory has been his high notes, and he still delivered them sometimes. But to do so now, he must conserve his energy and pace himself. His eyes were often fixed on the prompter, and he did not seem to know the music well enough. He rallied for Act Four, his most consistent singing of the night. That portion of the score may be the most fresh in his mind, as he sang that act as part of his 30th-anniversary gala at the Met in 1998.

The sorry image that captured the overall performance came during the Triumphant Scene, as the stage filled with Egyptian soldiers, cheering throngs and captured Ethiopians. Radames, the warrior hero, was rolled in on a horse-drawn cart and helped down by two guards. During the choral ensemble, as Aida,

Princess Amneris and even the King of Egypt stood before him, Mr. Pavarotti, who has trouble on his feet, sat slumped in a makeshift bench that had been moved to center stage.

Whenever Mr. Pavarotti was not onstage, Mr. Levine tried to rouse the other singers into getting this "Aida" off the ground. When Ms. Voigt first sang the title role at the Met last season, it was a vocally strong but still unformed performance. She has made enormous leaps, filling the phrases with lustrous, penetrating yet unforced tone and bringing melting beauty to the soft, pliant lyrical moments. She looked much better in a wig of long, brownish braids than she did last season in a puffy Afro. If she were able to work on the role with Mr. Levine in a production unhampered by a struggling Radames, she could well become a great Aida.

Ms. Borodina is already a great Amneris. She has one of the most purely beautiful voices around. In this role, she demonstrated how much sheer power and chilling intensity she can call on as well. A restrained but effective actress, she is a lovely, natural presence on stage.

For some years, Mr. Delavan has been a pillar of the New York City Opera across the plaza at Lincoln Center, and his Met debut was long overdue. His robust, virile voice sounded wonderful in the house. And his crisp Italian diction, musical intelligence, dramatic ardor and understanding of Verdian style could make him very useful to the Met.

Joseph Volpe, the Met's general manager, has said that the company "plans" to have Mr. Pavarotti back next season, though in what capacity he would not specify. Perhaps a gala farewell concert? Certainly singing Radames or any comparable role is now beyond him. But despite his shaky performance, Mr. Pavarotti won lusty cheers from the loyal Met audience. If this were his official farewell, we would all, critics included, be joining in misty-eyed salutes. He has had one of the most important careers in opera history. The Met should help him end it with dignity.

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