

BJU brings fire to 'Il Trovatore'

By Paul Hyde

Arts Writer

ph Hyde@greenvilleonline.com

Bob Jones University's "Il Trovatore" ("The Troubadour"), which opened Thursday evening in Rodeheaver Auditorium, is so electrifying at times that one is apt to forgive any shortcomings in this new production of Verdi's tremendously challenging opera.

Let's be upfront about its strongest asset: the fiery performance by mezzo-soprano Mary Phillips as the gypsy Azucena, who raised the troubadour of the title as her son.

With her powerful and radiant voice, Phillips makes this a riveting production whenever she takes the stage.

The famously complex and admittedly melodramatic plot of "Il Trovatore"

centers on a love triangle: Both the troubadour Manrico and the Count di Luna seek the hand of the beautiful lady-in-waiting Leonora.

Manrico and the Count possess a murderous rage toward each other even though, unbeknownst to both, they're brothers.

Azucena, meanwhile, longs to avenge her mother, burned at the stake before her eyes. When Phillips, as Azucena, narrates the story's horrific background, aided by a BJU film crew's gripping video projections, the opera becomes spell-binding. Phillips is one of four guest artists cast in the principal roles.

To be sure, this production, updated to 19th century Spain, boasts other strengths. Soprano Laquita Mitchell sings Leonora with a lustrous, expressive voice, shining particularly in her Act IV aria "D'amor

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sull'ali rosee."

The resonant and stentorian baritone Mark Walters contributes a forceful portrayal of the Count. Walters sings with fierce gusto but also offers a suave account of the Count's lyrical "Il balen del suo sorriso."

Tenor James Taylor, as Manrico, has a nicely focused voice but sounds like he would be more at home singing Mozart. Taylor often lacks the requisite heft and thrust to penetrate Verdi's thick orchestral textures. But Taylor, after all, has the unenviable task of tackling one of opera's most daunting roles.

BJU staff and students serve in supporting roles and as the chorus. BJU music and voice instructor David Parker is a solid Ferrando.

The huge BJU chorus, meanwhile, produces some glorious sounds throughout the opera, delivering a wonderfully raucous "Anvil Chorus."

Darren P. Lawson's stage direction is clean and efficient. Jeffrey Stegall's steel-and-concrete industrial set seems quite appropriate for Verdi's dark and dramatically potent tragedy.

C. Stanley Eby conducts a tight and well-shaped performance with brisk tempos. Eby draws generally polished and rhythmically precise playing from the BJU student orchestra.

One more performance remains, tonight at 8 p.m., of BJU's "Il Trovatore." For more information, call 864-770-1372.

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