

# RICHARD BONYNGE

## CONDUCTOR

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THE VANCOUVER SUN

### It's All About The Singing

REVIEW: Vancouver Opera revives Bellini's Norma

BY DAVID GORDON DUKE, NOVEMBER 29, 2009

Following several seasons in which theatrical values (not to mention plain old sex) featured big-time, Vancouver Opera began its 50th anniversary season with a performance of Bellini's Norma that harkened back to performance styles of yesteryear.

This is no criticism. The bel canto repertoire isn't long on credible plots or intense psychology revelations; rather, it offers highly stylized musical numbers tailor-made for equally stylized singing.

The VO set and costumes are serviceable but, with the exception of a single striking moment at the very end, there's nothing that would even mildly surprise Bellini's contemporaries, if our images of 19th century performances are anything to go on. Stage Director Tazewell Thompson moved his singers around with dispatch, but their stiff gestural language was ultra-traditional.

What, then, makes this production such a success? Though Bellini crafts a few telling moments for supporting characters and gives us some splendid choral writing, Norma is all about a trio of principals— soprano Hasmik Papian, in the title role, mezzo Kate Aldrich as her rival Adalgisa, and tenor Richard Margison as the object of both their affections. Each was impressive on her or his own; in duets and trios, they were particularly well matched.

Margison turned in a strong reading of a mono-dimensional character. Kate Aldrich makes her VO debut: we will want to hear more from her. Solid throughout her range, capable of beautifully synchronised blend, she brought both fiery intensity and considerable sweetness to her role. Hasmik Papian's greatest gift isn't high notes or agility, though she's got both, but dramatic intensity. On Saturday it took a bit of time for her smouldering presence to catch flame, but when it did, she gave her character as much depth and complexity as any audience could expect.

**Keeping everything impressively under control was conductor Richard Bonynge. This was a sentimental though entirely appropriate return for the great bel canto specialist. Our Vancouver Opera orchestra was his innovation many decades ago. One hopes that working with it after all these years gives Bonynge a much-deserved sense of lasting accomplishment. Today it is a reliable, disciplined pit orchestra, whose sensitive support of the singers ensured the evening's success.**

**Old school, unquestionably, but musically compelling, this Norma is quite rightly all about the singing.**

Performances continue December 1, 3 and 5.

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