

On the Aisle

Sumptuous Cast, Good New Conductor, More Intermission than Opera

BY CLAUDIA CASSIDY

EVEN THE TRUNCATED version of "Don Carlo" which the Lyric uses—the one minus the whole first act and the masked ball with ballet—runs four acts and seven scenes. In spite of a sumptuous cast, some superb singing, and the debut as conductor of Antonino Votto, there were times at Friday night's Civic Opera house opening when I felt uneasily certain that there was more intermission than opera. Back in 1957 when the Robert Fletcher settings were new their chief virtue was that they moved swiftly. This time they took forever.

Even when it moves like silk "Don Carlo" is less an opera than a series of mystifying episodes with a few fine scenes and a single great one that comes in act three and mounts from Philip of Spain's soliloquy, magnificently sung by Boris Christoff, to the roof raiser "O don fatale," sung by Giulietta Simonato to do just that—raise the operatic roof. Otherwise it is up to the singers and the conductor to keep you faithful to less than the best Verdi—which of course can still be better than much you hear in the opera house.

That they did just that is eloquent testament to as remarkable a cast as good taste and generous purse strings could collect for an opening. In major roles only Mr. Christoff and the invaluable Tito



Richard Tucker as Don Carlos.

Moorish romance with mandolin. And in case her singing reminded you of her debut here as Adalgisa to the Callas Norma, she recently recorded Norma's "Casta diva," just to show she could.

Margherita Roberti as the luckless Valois made me want to hear her in full song, as I have heard her in Italy, and without that disfiguring wig and headdress, for she is an attractive girl. She also has an extraordinary voice which she uses exquisitely. An Aida voice? I am not sure. But it will be a performance by an artist, as her "Nabucco" was in Florence a year ago last summer.

Ferruccio Mazzoli of the big, deep voice and the instinct for not moving when it is wiser to stand still captured an unusual amount of the Grand Inquisitor's power for so young a man. There was something Tartar about him with that scarlet cowl circling the blind face—something granitic as he faced the formidable king, and won.

With a family tree, a European history book a bit jiggled out of fact, and a whole collection of loves and jealousies at cross purposes, plus an auto-da-fe, a "heavenly" voice in real trouble, and some mystical appearances by the dead Charles V, you can figure out a plot for "Don Carlo," which I call that out of courtesy to the Lyric, having grown up on "Don Carlos," which I infinitely prefer. But it really is simpler at this opera just to let people sing and not worry about the plot. Christopher West's staging is no help. Just depend on the singers and on calm, collected and competent Mr. Votto, newly arrived from the Scala, and welcome.

"DON CARLO"

Opera by Giuseppe Verdi. Italian text by Mery and du Locle, after Schiller. Staged by Christopher West in a production designed by Robert Fletcher. Presented by Lyric Opera of Chicago in the Civic Opera house Friday evening, Oct. 14, 1960.

THE CAST

Elizabeth of Valois. Margherita Roberti
The Princess Eboli. Giulietta Simonato
Don Carlos Richard Tucker
Rodrigo, Marquis of Posa. Tito Gobbi
Philip II of Spain Boris Christoff
The Grand Inquisitor. Ferruccio Mazzoli
A Monk Franco Ventriglia
Tebaldo, a page Jeanne Diamond
Count Lerma Mariano Caruso
A heavenly voice Shirley Johnson
Conductor Antonino Votto

Gobbi were held over from the earlier production, both in beautiful voice. Mr. Christoff has shadows and iron in that commanding bass, and if his Philip suggests that Boris Godunoff had annexed Spain, at least you know a king has come to judgment. Mr. Gobbi, courtier and stylist, poured out ribbons of baritone song whenever encouraged by Verdi, and met the worst scenes with the calm of an artist who knows he can't always win.

Richard Tucker was the new Don Carlo—and there is really a role to frighten a man, even with the fits left out. But Mr. Tucker took it in stride and some striking costumes with gestures to match, and he sang in that glorious tenor that vaults like velvet wrapped steel right to the gallery.

Simonato was in her glory as the treacherous Eboli who wins not only the vocal plum of them all as a display piece—that same "O don fatale"—but also has the glittering