On the Aisle: Sumptuous Cast, Good New Conductor, More Intermission than Opera

BY CLAUDIA CASSIDY

VEN 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. It is a sumptuous production, and a 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, there were times that they moved swiftly. This time they took forever.

Even the routine matters like "Don Carlo" is less an opera than a series of mystifying episodes with a few fine moments. It was staged against one that comes in act three and mounts from Philip of Hapsburg's soppololy, magnificently sung by Boris Christoff, to the roof raiser "O don fatale," sung by Giulietta Simionato.

That they did just that is eloquent testament to its remarkability as good as taste and generous purse strings combined. In major roles only Mr. Christoff and the invaluable Tito Gobbi were held over from the earlier production, both in beautiful voice. Mr. Christoff's Don Carlo was a magnificently vocal and commanding bass, and if his Philip suggests that Boris Goduni has won back at least you know a king has come to judgment. Mr. Gobbi, courtier and stylist, poured out ribbons of baritone that whenever encouraged by Verdi, and met the worst scenes with his natural ease, and you know 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. Tucker managed to sing in stride and some striking gestures to match, and he sang in gleaming white suits like velvet wrapped steet right to the gallery.

Simionato was in her glory as the treacherous Eboli who with her usual skill created all of them as a display piece—that same "O don fatale"—but also has the glittering

Richard Tucker as Don Carlo.

Moorish romance with man's arms slung behind him, singing, reminding you of her debut here as Adalgisa to the Callas Norma, she recently recorded as Norma's "Casta diva," just to show she could.

Margherita Roberti as the luckless Valetta made me want to hear her in full song, as I have heard her in Italy, and get a real idea of her extraordinary voice, which she uses exclusively. An Aida voice? I am not sure. But it will be a performance by an artist, rather "Nabucco" in Florence a year ago last summer.

Ferruccio Mazzoli of the big, deep voice and the thunderous voice which is not moving when it is wiser to stand still captured an unusual amount of the crowd's power for so young a man. There was something Tartar about him with that scrawled "crowning the blind face — something granitic as he faced the formidable king.

With a family tree, a European history book a bit ig­nored out of fact, and a whole collection of loves and jealousies at cross purposes, plus an auto-da-fe, a "heavenly" "Venetian 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 Giovanni," 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 voices and the calm, collected and competent Mr. Votto, newly arrived from the Scala, and welcome.