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School is in session with a lesson in 'Rigoletto'

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Karen Warren, Staff

Ashly Neumann and James Rodriguez, both standing in background, practice their singing roles with the University of Houston orchestra in preparation for the staging of "Rigoletto."

By Steven Brown

March 31, 2013

Rehearsing together for the first time, the singers and orchestra launch into one of the stormiest

duets in opera.

The baritone, playing an enraged father, describes the thunderbolts of vengeance he'll unleash on his daughter's seducer. The soprano, portraying the heartbroken but merciful girl, begs him to relent.

"No!" he replies, shouting as much as singing.

The churning orchestra drives the duet to its peak. She caps off her last plea with a luminous high E-flat. He fires back with a high A-flat that exudes the father's fury.

After a final orchestral outburst brings down the imaginary curtain, the players applaud the hardworking singers' efforts. It's a scene that has played out for generations in rehearsal halls like this one.

Well, not quite like this one. This is a studio at the University of Houston. The school's Moores Opera Center is staging Giuseppe Verdi's "Rigoletto" - a piece most universities wouldn't go near.

"A year ago, if you had told me we were going to do it, I probably would've laughed at you," says Buck Ross, the center's director.

Why? Verdi is practically synonymous with red-blooded singing. That's the No. 1 reason audiences thrill to his music. But it puts singers to the test. When "Rigoletto" or another fiery Verdi drama reaches full throttle, delivering what Verdi demands is a challenge even for professionals.

"Rigoletto" is a prime example. The title character - the court jester to a skirt-chasing duke - ranges from the gentlest loving-father lyricism to explosions of vengeance. Even mature, experienced baritones say a performance as Rigoletto leaves them wiped out.



Karen Warren, Staff

Brett Mitchell, conductor of the University of Houston's orchestra, leads members of the UH opera program, including

Ashly Neumann, who plays "Gilda" and James Rodriguez, the singer playing the title role (a court jester who's over-protective of his daughter, with tragic results), during rehearsal of "Rigoletto," an opera by Giuseppe Verdi, Tuesday, March 26, 2013, in Houston. (Karen Warren / Houston Chronicle)

No wonder this is only the third time in the opera center's 27 years that it's tackling anything by Verdi. The other two occasions - most recently in October 2011 - featured his Shakespeare comedy "Falstaff," which skips the vocal dynamite.

"We don't have the same luxury that a professional company does, which is to decide what piece they will do and then take their pick of the world's singers to do it," Ross says. "We have to look at who we have."

Experience helps

Of the university's 95 or so voice majors, Ross says, about two-thirds are working on master's or doctoral degrees. Occasionally, graduate students come along who are returning to school after time in the real world. Not only do they have the benefit of experience - musical or otherwise - but they are a few years older. Especially for men, whose voices may not mature until they're in their 30s, that can make a crucial difference.

"Sometimes," Ross says, "just the right people happen to be in place at the right time."

This is one of those times.



Karen Warren, Staff

Brett Mitchell, conductor of the University of Houston's orchestra, leads members of the UH opera program during rehearsal of "Rigoletto," an opera by Giuseppe Verdi, Tuesday, March 26, 2013, in Houston. (Karen Warren / Houston Chronicle)

"Rigoletto is my dream role," James Rodriguez says.

Rodriguez, 31, earned a bachelor's in music from Southern Methodist University. He then spent five years singing and making a living. In 2009, he came to UH to start on his master's degree and is now

in the second year of the doctoral program.

"He had a big vocal breakthrough," Ross says. "He's in his early 30s, so he's not a kid by any means." That makes it possible for him to play Rigoletto.

UH also happened to have a tenor, Chris Trapani, who Ross felt could handle the less-onerous but still-challenging role of the licentious Duke of Mantua. To play Rigoletto's daughter, Gilda, whose music is within easier reach of talented music-school students, Ross split the performances between two of them, Ashly Neumann and Kirsten Leslie. Trapani, Neumann and Leslie are finishing their master's degrees this spring.

Here's one measure of the task Ross put in front of Rodriguez and Trapani by casting them: Sidestepping his usual practice of assigning opera roles at the start of the school year, he says, he tipped them off to "Rigoletto" a year ago, so they could start learning the music during the summer.

"When Mr. Ross told me about doing 'Rigoletto,' my jaw dropped," Rodriguez says. "I could not possibly be more excited. ... I never thought I would sing it."

While Rodriguez has played Figaro in Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart's "The Marriage of Figaro," an opera that's more typical university fare, Rigoletto will be the most taxing role he has ever sung. In addition to its vocal demands, he says, it's physically challenging. Rigoletto is hunchbacked, so the singer portraying him has to embody that without getting knotted up.

Ross, the stage director for "Rigoletto," is working with him on that. Rodriguez and his voice teacher, Joseph Evans, are planning how he can pace himself through Rigoletto's music - when to let loose and when to conserve his voice and energy.

All that contributes to the educational value of a big role.

"There are ways to create the look and the sound of high drama without actually expending a lot of energy," Ross says. "It's a trick, is what it is. But it's one that beginners have to learn by experience."

Special talent

Another factor is helping bring "Rigoletto" within the school's reach. The Moores Opera House, with 800 seats, is a fraction of the size of the theaters where "Rigoletto" is usually performed. A voice doesn't have to be so booming, Ross says, to make an impact.

This is the second consecutive season the university's opera schedule has benefited from an out-of-the-ordinary student.

Last year, Ross says, one of the doctoral students was a bass with professional experience. Ross parlayed that into a staging of "Der Rosenkavalier," Richard Strauss' Viennese comedy, which spends a lot of time on a blustery baron. The staging won an award from the National Opera Association, which focuses on educational programs.

Ross makes a promise: If the university enrolls a couple of singers who could handle Richard Wagner's "Tristan und Isolde," he'll go for it. He doesn't expect that vow to be put to the test, though.

"There are all kinds of operas I'd like to do sometime, but are not likely to be (possible) in a

university," Ross says. "But I'm in a never-say-never kind of mode. Because 'Rigoletto' would've been one of those."

'Rigoletto'

When: 7:30 p.m. Friday, 2 p.m. Sunday.

Where: Moores Opera House, University of Houston, entrance 16 off Cullen Boulevard

Tickets: \$20; 713-743-3313, www.uh.edu.

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