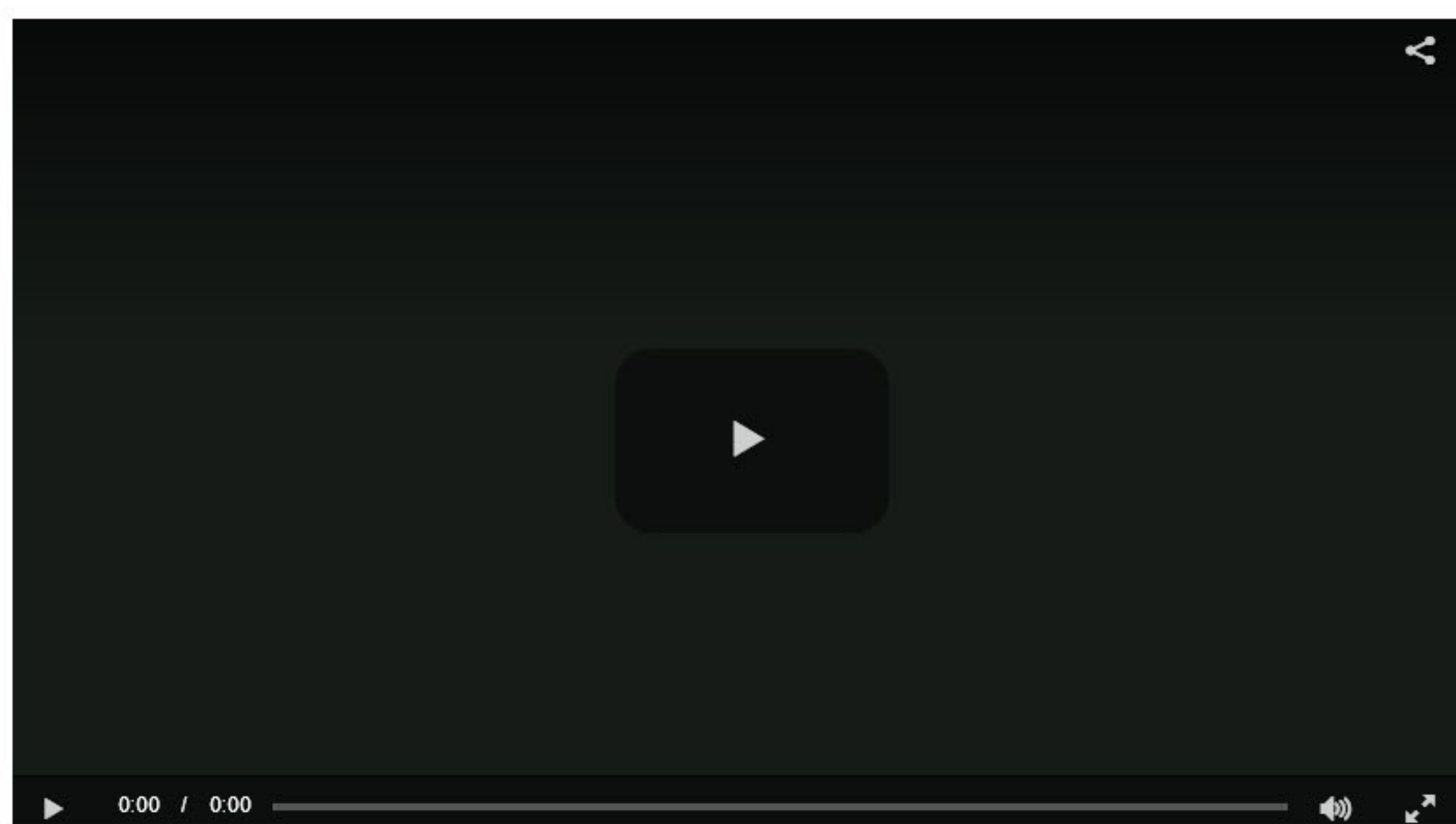


Review: Vancouver Opera's opulent Don Carlo (with video)

DAVID GORDON DUKE, SPECIAL TO THE SUN | 05.04.2014 |



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It's been forty years since Vancouver last heard Giuseppe Verdi's opulent Don Carlo. That's reason enough to see a production touted as one of Vancouver Opera's most extravagant. An even better reason is very fine singing from a cast of considerable prowess.

Verdi composed Don Carlo at a key moment in his career when he was moving beyond the Italian conventions that had served him so well: notions pilfered from French "Grand Opera" and not-entirely-digested Wagner abound. Consequently, the score can seem patchy, and the libretto, quarried from a costume drama by Schiller, a bit stale — not helped here by ploddingly literal surtitles.

Yet the craft with which Verdi practices his musical art and his sure-footed sense of theatre make the work remarkable.

This co-production with Hawaii Opera Theatre and Opera Hong Kong employs a tight, conventional set and stock costumes to convey period voluptuousness (though in the auto-da-fé scene the king's garb seems more Edward VII than Phillip II). The success of this Don Carlo hangs on its cast, not its trappings.

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Verdi kept the vocal focus dark with four male voices, including two basses, baritone, and tenor, plus dramatic mezzo and dramatic soprano. We've heard Canadian baritone Brett Plegato rather a lot in Vancouver; here he sings a solid Rodrigo, Don Carlo's confidant, especially when operating in heroic baritone mode. Basses Peter Volpe (Philip II, the conflicted authority figure) and Gregory Frank (the sinister Grand Inquisitor) define the rancid relationship between church and state, and excel in Verdi's exceptional third act.

Notwithstanding a vision long on ideas and short on romance, Verdi is generous to his ladies. Canadian Joni Henson is clearly a soprano on the rise, using her big voice with a fine sense of style as Elisabeth de Valois, Don Carlo's sweetheart and Philip's Queen. Mezzo Mary Phillips, as Princess Eboli, deserves an opera best supporting actress Oscar: vocally confident and theatrically practised, she is a singer/actress of power and stature.

In the title role, Andrea Carè makes a remarkable VO debut as a textbook example of an Italian tenor: consistently splendid, with all the swagger and self-assurance to command the stage every second he's on and a sound that rings to the rafters.

Don Carlo's other superstar remains unseen but at the centre of this production's success. Given the demands of the unfamiliar score, it's no surprise the orchestra and chorus have the occasional rough moment. Yet music director Jonathan Darlington delivers Verdi's grandest of effects with unruffled authority one moment, then makes the sprawling extravaganza sound like chamber music the next.

Performances continue May 8, 10, 11