

By Jeff Rapsis for HippoPress.com

The posters promised "Passion, Perils, and Pandemonium," and those who attended last Friday's "Wild Night at the Opera" event at St. Joseph Cathedral found a concert that lived up to the hype. Simply put, it was an evening filled with great singing from a group of gifted vocalists.

Staged by Granite State Opera, the concert was designed as a follow-up to a similar event held last season at the Palace Theatre. In addition to the change in venue, there was one other key difference-no orchestra was on hand for Philip Lauriat, the group's artistic director, to lead.

But that didn't diminish the main attraction, which was a cast of superb singers doing what they do best. In many ways, Michelle Alexander's piano accompaniment kept attention focused on the voices and helped glue together the program, which was a grab bag of arias and ensembles from works as diverse as Mozart's "Don Giovanni" and Puccini's "La Boheme."

Lauriat is winning a reputation for his ability to attract big voices to perform for New Hampshire audiences, and Friday's concert was another stunner in this regard. At one time or another, each of the six soloists filled the big church with sound that was alternately glorious or hair-raising, depending on the material.

Mark Cleveland began with a fine dramatic rendition of Ferrando's Narration from "Il Trovatore," spitting out "Bugiarda!" (She lied!) with particular relish. Soprano Martha Warren, something of a Granite State Opera regular, followed with a moving performance of Lenora's "Tacea la notte placida" taken from the same opera.

Warren, whose voice lends a warm glow to everything she sings, started modestly but then built inexorably to a breath-taking climax on "Al core al guardo estatico" (To my heart, to my enraptured eyes).

In another extended excerpt from "Il Trovatore," mezzo-soprano Janice Edwards made for a focused and frightening Azucena, accompanied by Lauriat singing the tenor role of Manrico. In an amazingly concentrated performance, Edwards sang the whole excerpt as if in a trance.

While Edwards was chilling, Lauriat proved a good foil, spicing up his performance with enough pantomime to enhance the drama in the music. Ever the showman, Lauriat made the most of his big moment on "Che mi dice: Non ferir!" (Which told me-do not strike!), letting loose with an unrestrained cry of high tenor anguish.

Baritone James Kleyla, a local favorite, completed the "Il Trovatore" excerpts with a fine performance as Conte in the Il Balen scene, but he truly shined later as Marcello in excerpts from "La Boheme."

Rounding out the cast were tenor Kevin Hill and soprano Nouné Karapetian, who played Rodolfo and Mimi in a semi-staged version of the end of Act I from "La Boheme." Using a table and other props, the pair acted out the scene where the characters first meet.

Though it was a little odd to see Hill's starving poet wearing a tuxedo, the scene worked. The voices carried the day, with both singers bringing a fresh, youthful sound to Puccini's drama. There was some real chemistry there, too-enough to whet one's appetite to see the pair in a fully staged production.

The concert's second half brought more interesting numbers, including the Act 3 quartet from "La Boheme." Lauriat first had the cast members read the overlapping libretto in English and without music to provide a better sense of what Puccini had accomplished; only then did they sing it through.

This was where Kleyla really let loose, putting his all into the angry outbursts of Marcello, the suspicious husband. It was another case of the "Perils" concert going way beyond a mere recital; rather, it was filled with drama that is the lifeblood of opera. No one was just phoning it in.

No less of a contributor was Michelle Alexander, accompanist for the entire concert. Throughout the performance, she demonstrated a gift for supporting the voices in a wide range of music. Perhaps the highlight was her rendition of the delicate swirling figurations that accompanied Janice Edwards in Dalila's Aria from "Sampson and Delilah."

Adding greatly to the enjoyment of the evening was Lauriat's decision to include the complete lyrics as well as English translations in the program book. That, along with his colorful narration and comments, is the kinds of gesture that helps win audiences and keeps them coming back for more.

The unusual church setting inspired a certain amount of low-key humor. Ushers escorted patron up the aisle to their seats; more than once someone was heard to say, "I'm with the groom's family." But Lauriat, no slouch in the humor department himself, resisted the urge to call out hymn numbers from the pulpit or serve communion wafers at intermission.