

Nabucco is Back

After 30 years, San Diego Opera stages Verdi's "Nabucco" again

BY PAT LAUNER



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THE JEWS ARE ATTACKED, conquered, reviled, exiled. It's an old, old story. But Giuseppe Verdi made it sing.

His third opera, "Nabucco," was based on a Biblical tale, as well as an 1836 play by August Anicet-Bourgeois and Francis Cornue. It's the work that permanently established his reputation as a composer. "This is the opera with which my artistic career really begins," Verdi famously said.

The title is a shortened form of Nabucodonosor (Nebuchadnezzar), the opera's original name (tough to say and spell, in both Italian and English). The libretto follows the plight of the Jews as the Temple is destroyed and they're expelled from their homeland.

The time is 587 B.C.E. Nabucco, the king of Babylon, is advancing on Jerusalem, and the Jews are forced to hide in the Temple, where Nabucco's younger daughter, Fenena, is being held prisoner. She was kidnapped by Zaccaria, the High Priest of Jerusalem, who leaves her under the protection of Ismaele, nephew of the King of Jerusalem. Fenena and Ismaele are secretly lovers, but Fenena's older sister, Abigaille, leader of Nabucco's armies, is also in love with Ismaele. Discovering him with her sister, the jealous, power-hungry Abigaille unleashes a torrent of evil and vengeance, which triggers the destruction of the Temple, the condemnation and exile of the Jews, the (temporary) madness of Nabucco, his promise to rebuild the Temple and Abigaille's repentant suicide.

At its opening at Teatro alla Scala in 1842, audiences were wild with enthusiasm for Verdi's first masterwork. But the opera is not performed as frequently as others in the Verdi canon, and the San Diego Opera hasn't produced "Nabucco" for decades. Part of the reason is the role of Abigaille, which has proven to be the downfall of many a soprano. Maria Callas sang it only three times. Leontyne Price and Dame Joan Sutherland refused to sing it at all. But Sylvie Valayre has assayed the role many times; she relishes the challenge.

"The way it's written is extremely difficult," says the ebullient French soprano. "When Verdi wrote it, he was very young and very influenced by Bellini and Donizetti. Like 'Lucia' (Donizetti's 'Lucia di Lammermoor'), it requires very agile vocalizing, sometimes jumping two octaves. It can be very dangerous for the voice. Verdi later

wrote in a way that's easier for the singer.

"This work has the sense of a very young person who designs or paints," Valayre continues. "You can feel the genius, the technique is good, but his work definitely gets more mature later. 'Nabucco' requires very low notes, a good mid range, very high notes, all sung piano, forte and diminuendo. There's really long, complex vocalizing. It takes a lot of exercise to lighten up my voice so it will move fast. Even 'Turandot' doesn't require the agility that 'Nabucco' does."

And that's why San Diegans haven't seen "Nabucco" since 1981.

"We have not staged the opera for almost 30 years," says San Diego Opera general and artistic director Ian Campbell, "because I have always wanted to have a strong cast, and singers for both Abigaille and Nabucco are few. Nabucco requires a full-voiced, strong Verdi baritone, and Abigaille needs a soprano who can manage dramatic passages, piano passages and coloratura at both the highest and lowest extensions of her range.

"Verdi was cruel in his demands on Abigaille," Campbell admits. "And few women conquer the role as does Sylvie. She nails it, with dramatic intensity. Recently, I heard her in 'Turandot' in Berlin, dressed in black leather and carrying a whip. She was formidable in the title role. But offstage, Sylvie is as soft as swan's down. However, I do check her dressing room every night for the whip. She could forget which opera she's singing!"

With her broad vocal and dramatic range, Valayre has sung all the major roles at all the major opera houses: Mimi in "La Bohème," Violetta in "La Traviata," Elisabetta in "Don Carlo," Lady Macbeth in "Macbeth," the title roles in "Tosca," "Norma," "Aida," "Salome" and "Madama Butterfly," at venues including the Metropolitan Opera, La Scala, Covent Garden and all over Europe and the U.S. Among other locales, she's performed "Nabucco," one of her signature roles, in Berlin, Warsaw, Moscow and Cyprus.

Critics attending the Verona and Vienna productions of "Nabucco" praised her "exquisite vocal capacities" and her "flawless mastery of the dramatic and the lyrical passages." According to Das Opernglas, Germany's most important opera magazine, she had "breathtaking stage presence...The persuasiveness of her acting



Sylvie Valayre sings the part of Abigail in San Diego Opera's "Nabucco."

PHOTO BY ROBERTO RICCI/COURTESY SAN DIEGO OPERA

was only the cherry on the cake, since she accomplished a brilliant vocal act of daring, coping with all the extremely delicate perils of the part with enviable aplomb."

But Valayre brings more than just vocal and dramatic acumen to this opera. She also brings her Jewish heritage.

Born only steps away from the Bastille — on Oct. 10, just like Verdi! — she knew from the age of 4 that she wanted to spend her life onstage. Her first love was musical theater, but her musically inclined family helped her develop eclectic taste.

Her mother, a Tunisian with a Berber background, was raised in the Sephardic tradition. Before World War II, Valayre's mother and her family traveled to France; during the German occupation, they were rounded up and sent to detention camps. Valayre's mother and aunt were able to obtain false passports and escape.

The arts are a palpable force in the family. Her father, a French-Hungarian, met her mother at an audition. One of her brothers is a playwright, currently living in the San Francisco Bay area. Her Italian husband is a violinist who plays in the Turin Opera House in Italy. Valayre thinks he may be a Converso, from a family of crypto-Jews, but she says it's hard to trace the history.

Valayre herself is not religious, but she is "culturally Jewish"; her feelings on that subject, like everything else about her, are strong. And she proudly takes her history into the role of Abigail.

"I'm a Jewish girl," she says, "singing the part of a non-Jewish girl who finds the Jewish God at the end of the play. I love the thought of that."

Overall, she finds the opera, with its Italian libretto by Temistocle Solera, to be "pro-Semitic."

"Verdi had a lot of Jewish friends," Valayre says. "I've heard a rumor — perhaps it's an urban legend — that one of Verdi's Jewish friends once asked him for help for the Jews of Tunisia. Verdi made a bargain with the Bey, the governor of Tunisia, who loved his music. Verdi said 'I will write something,' so the story goes, 'if you give more freedom to the Jews.' It's just a rumor, but I like it."

Valayre is also intrigued by the fact that, at the end of the opera's second act, after Nabucco blasphemes against the God of the Jews, he's struck by lightning.

"[God] strikes him down," Valayre asserts. "I think that shows a positive attitude toward Jews and their God. There are Jews for Jesus; there must be Catholics for Israel, or something like that," she adds with a chuckle.

Despite her hectic travel and performance schedule, Valayre is always aware of the potential for *mitzvot*, good deeds. She and her husband are trying to adopt a child from Ethiopia. She recently sang a benefit concert in Washington, D.C., for Peace Child Israel, an organization that uses theater as a tool for dialogue between Arab and Jewish citizens of Israel.

"That kind of concert is my mitzvah and my duty as a human being," she says. "I performed in a huge synagogue with an Israeli pianist. There are excerpts on YouTube. I wanted to send it to all the Jewish communities in America."

In her personal and professional time, Valayre lives and breathes music.

"My head is always singing inside," she says. "I'm hypnotized by my work. But when I'm not in production, I take time to go to museums, movies, take walks. I love the sun and sea. I love kids. I try to make my *mitzvot* as much as I can. I try to be a good human being. That's the real mark of success."

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Zeljko Lucic sings the part of Nabucco in San Diego Opera's "Nabucco."

Valayre is enthusiastic about returning to San Diego, where she made her SDO debut last season in "Tosca." She'll be working with Yugoslavian baritone Zeljko Lucic (Nabucco) and Iranian stage director Lotfi Mansouri for the first time. Though she's sung the role many times, she finds each production "new and fresh and different. I change my partner and director and conductor, and it's all new."

"And now," Valayre confesses, "as I mature, I bring more facets to the role. Abigail is a young woman, maybe 17 or 18 years old. I have to keep the freshness, the youth of the character. We singers are like painters. It's boring to have just one color. The more colors you have for what you want to describe and convey, the better it is for everyone."

The San Diego Opera production of "Nabucco" runs for four performances only, Feb. 20-28, at the Civic Theatre. A free, informal panel discussion with the artists will be Feb. 11 at 5:30 p.m. in the Beverly Sills Salon at the Civic Theatre. Tickets and information are at (619) 533-7000, www.sdopera.com. ✧