



## A Fine Performance

*Verdi's 'Nabucco' from San Diego Opera,  
enjoyed by MARIA NOCKIN*

*Nabucco* was Giuseppe Verdi's third opera. His first, *Oberto*, was a moderate success and he was commissioned to write two more for the La Scala theatre in Milan. Unfortunately, his second work, a comedy called *Un giorno di regno*, was not a success and had only one performance. It had not been long since the composer's first wife, Margherita, had passed away. As a result, the comedy written in the midst of these tragic circumstances was not his best work. Nor was he happy with the singers given to him by the theater. Verdi's own assessment: 'Certainly the music was to some extent to blame, but then, so too was the performance.' On 9 March 1842, the twenty-nine-year-old composer got another chance at success and grasped it with a firm hand.

Temistocle Solera, a fellow composer who had written the text for *Oberto* and would later write libretti for Verdi's *Giovanna d'Arco* and *Attila*, based *Nabucco* on the Biblical story and on a popular 1836 French play by Auguste Anicet-Bourgeois and Francis Cornue. Giuseppina Strepponi, a soprano famous for her vocal agility and commanding stage presence, sang the leading role of Abigaille. She had also starred in *Oberto* and her fame may have helped sell tickets for both shows. With a viable libretto and a good cast, *Nabucco* pleased its Milan audiences.



A scene from Verdi's 'Nabucco' at San Diego Opera. Photo © 2010 Cory Weaver

Strepponi's most famous roles had included *Lucia di Lammermoor*, *Norma* and *La Cenerentola*, so we know she was an expert at singing coloratura, but by the time she sang Abigaille in *Nabucco* she was nearing the end of her career. After her retirement, she and Verdi continued their relationship and some years later they married.



Raymond Aceto as Zaccaria in Verdi's 'Nabucco' at San Diego Opera. Photo © 2010 Cory Weaver

Verdi later stated that *Nabucco* 'was the opera that began his artistic

career'. He felt that it had been 'born under a lucky star' because it dominated the Milan season despite competition from operas by Donizetti and Pacini playing nearby. He composed it in the style that was popular in the early and mid nineteenth century and it is different from his later works. Here, arias have defined boundaries and often come with cabalettas like those of Donizetti and Bellini. Later, he would weave the arias more smoothly into the fabric of the drama and dispense with much of the coloratura.



Arthur Shen as Ismaele (foreground), Susana Poretsky as Fenena and Richard Paul Fink in the title role of Verdi's 'Nabucco' at San Diego Opera. Photo © 2010 Cory Weaver

On 23 February 2010, San Diego Opera presented *Nabucco* in a production by Lotfi Mansouri. The work came to life with simple and functional scenery by Michael Yeargan and attractive brightly colored costumes by Jane Greenwood and Marie-Louis Waleck. The director kept the plot flowing and told the complicated story in a manner that made it a genuinely involving drama with crisply detailed characters. Michael Whitfield's subtle lighting design brought atmospheric accents to the picture.



**Raymond Aceto as Zaccaria and Susana Poretsky as Fenena (foreground), with Alfred Walker as the High Priest of Baal in 'Nabucco' at San Diego Opera. Photo © 2010 Cory Weaver**

This opera requires first class choral work and the San Diego Opera Chorus directed by Timothy Todd Simmons sang with beauty of tone and harmonic precision. They moved well, too, some as soldiers and others as the oppressed populace. The best-known piece, 'Va Pensiero', had a resounding emotional punch and was greeted with copious applause.



**Richard Paul Fink in the title role of Verdi's 'Nabucco' at San Diego Opera. Photo © 2010 Cory Weaver**

The original Nabucco was to be Zeljko Lucic who cancelled a few weeks before the performance. Fortunately, renowned baritone Richard Paul Fink was available. His interpretation combined physicality with dramatic coherence and he held the audience in his thrall. He sang with powerful resonant tones punctuated by beautifully lyric passages that showed the warmth in his voice.

The surprise of the evening was the young tenor, Arthur Shen, who regularly sings in Germany. As Ismaele, he had a butter smooth legato and he suffused his sonorous, elegant phrasing with emotion. We can expect to hear much more from him.



**Sylvie Valayre as Abigaille in Verdi's 'Nabucco' at San Diego Opera. Photo © 2010 Cory Weaver**

In the role of Abigaille, Sylvie Valayre sang with fiery tones that expressed the sentiments of the slave who wanted to rule. It is a fiendishly difficult role but she portrayed it with gusto. Raymond Aceto was an energetic Zaccaria with an impressive range. His resplendent voice flooded the hall with exciting sound.



Susana Poretsky as Fenena and Arthur Shen as Ismaele in Verdi's 'Nabucco' at San Diego Opera. Photo © 2010 Cory Weaver

As Fenena, Susana Poretsky's rich, silken voice, together with her refined acting skills, made her character's love for Ismaele and her vulnerability as a woman in troubled times very real. Priti Gandhi, who had sung a fine Musetta in the *La bohème* of a few weeks ago, was an affecting Anna. Alfred Walker commanded attention as the resplendent High Priest and San Diego Opera regular, Joseph Hu, was a splendid Abdallo.

Veteran conductor Edoardo Müller drew lucid, precise and stylish playing from the orchestra. The brass, in particular, played with brightness and finesse while the entire group produced sustained waves of gorgeous orchestral sonority. This was a fine performance of an opera not often seen on stage. It was an evening to be savored and remembered for a long time.

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There will be only two further performances of Verdi's *Nabucco* at San Diego Opera: Friday 26 February at 8pm and Sunday 28 February 2010 at 2pm. San Diego Opera's 2010 season also features productions of Gounod's *Romeo and Juliet* (13, 16, 19 and 21 March) and Verdi's *La traviata* (17, 20, 23 and 25 April). Further information from [www.sdopera.com](http://www.sdopera.com) or +1 619 533 7000.

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*NABUCCO*

*SAN DIEGO OPERA*

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