

'Il Trovatore': Quality all the way

By Mary Jane Doerr
special writer

Since its premiere season in 1971, Michigan Opera Theatre has striven to bring to its audiences the best — the most exciting new singers, the most effective productions, and the highest quality stage direction.

The company is one of the few regional opera companies that managed to challenge the yearly onslaught of the Metropolitan Opera, and thrive. Today, it is one of the 10 largest opera companies in North America with subscriptions increasing at a rate of 35 percent.

Saturday evening at Masonic Temple, those efforts surfaced again with a blockbuster production of an old favorite, "Il Trovatore," already sold out for two of its three performances. It was that special kind of evening — endless numbers of curtain calls and the kind of excitement we have come to associate with "grand opera."

The leads were spectacular — an old MOT friend, Leona Mitchell, at the pinnacle of her career; a controversial gypsy, Livia Budai, fresh from her debut on national television in the same role; a new star, Italian tenor Lando Bartolini, on his way to his debut at the Metropolitan Opera in the same role; an American baritone, James Dietsch, now building a successful career in Europe; and a young Detroit school teacher, Claritha Buggs, who won the 1986 District Metropolitan Opera Auditions.

MICHAEL GALLUP's securely delivered lead-off aria, "Abbieta zingara," as Ferrando, set the stage for what the ending held with a forceful declaration of the grizzly story of hatred and revenge.

Matthew Lata's stage direction let the singers repeat the success they have found in their roles all over the world. Surrounded by the cross-carved stone Romanesque castle of the Greater



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Miami Opera-Lyric Opera moveable sets. Lata's direction favored the opera's great arias and what Mitchell called the many soliloquies. Michael Baumgartner's lighting followed through, centering on the soldier's campfires and monk's candles, offering many exquisite scenes.

Although she has been criticized lately for singing off pitch, Livia Budai confined the fiery appeal of her volatile characterization of the vengeful Azucena to her acting and sang with a passionate sound that revealed a loving side to the gypsy.

Bartolini's two powerful arias "Ah! si, ben mio" and "Di quella pira" were as stirring as Mitchell's "Miserere" scene was moving. His makeup paired him easily with his long-lost brother, Count di Luna, James Dietsch. Just as MOT has done so many times in the past, it has brought significant talent to the Detroit stage to review before many other American audiences have had that opportunity. Bartolini certainly proved his merit Saturday evening with his full chested high C.

At three major European houses, Mitchell debuted as Leonora, one of her most successful roles. The sheer beauty and grace in her voice allows her to handle the dramatic Verdi melodies, the reason she has been so successful in this role.

Szaro in exhibit

Area artist William Szaro will be among the exhibitors in "Four American Artists," opening Sunday at Galerie Jacques, 616 Wesley, Ann Arbor. A reception for the artists will be 3-6 p.m. Saturday and Sunday. "Ultimate Theory," shown here, is an acrylic on paper. Szaro is a graduate of Wayne State University, worked on a master's degree at Indiana University and holds a certificate from Cooper Union Art School in New York.

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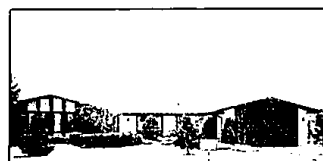
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