

RECITAL REVIEW

A Tenor Eagerly Greeted, But Not Yet a Star

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Salvatore Licitra

By Robert Commanday

One thing sure to send the pulses of opera fans racing is the sound of a tenor belting out his arias and if he's a new one, perhaps just in the discovery process, so much the better. That was the scene at UC Zellerbach Auditorum Sunday as a full crowd welcomed the latest comer, Salvatore Licitra, accompanied for his "American concert debut," by the SF Opera Orchestra, David Agler presiding.

For all the advance publicity, high hopes and the embrace of an eager audience wanting to believe, in the actuality of Licitra's performance the reports of eminence turned out to be somewhere between exaggerated and premature. That the young (34) tenor has a strong instrument and a good sense of the styles of the Verdi and Puccini styles was clear. However, his vocal production indicated difficulties for him in the long term, over and above the handicap of a cold Sunday that caused him to shorten the program a bit.

Licitra has a sturdy voice, that is still colored baritone from his younger voice while retaining a heft, warmth and projection in the lower range that serves the Verdi arias very well. This lower range gave solid depth to his opening selection, Alvaro's "La vita è inferno...O tue che in seno agl'angeli" (*La Forza del destino*) but his singing in it was unsettled and uneven. His lower notes achieved for him an impressive presence when the line of an aria swept upwards as in Dick Johnson's "Ch'ella mi creda libero e lontano" (Puccini's *La Fanciulla del West*).

Power but not moving

Licitra consistently colors his vowels dark and sings with mouth wide open, driving this often covered tone. If the effect is not one of shouting — the sound in the mid-high range is firm and strong — the consequences are likely to be serious. There are hints of this in his not always easy approach to the highs. The open focus without the resource of a keen, penetrating sound with metal in it, diminishes the possibilities for the needed intensity in such an emotionally shaken aria as

Macduff's "O figli... Ah, la paterna mano" (Verdi's *Macbeth*). It had power but was not moving.

The extent of Licitra's potential in really stirring his listeners was not evident. Perhaps it takes more experience in life and with specific roles to make such a work as "E lucevan le stelle" (Puccini's *Tosca*) the heart-winger it wants to be.

Cavaradossi in *Tosca* was the role that launched Licitra in his Met debut last May, as an emergency replacement for the ailing Pavarotti in what was to have been that star's Met farewell. (Licitra also sang it subsequently at La Scala.). On the other hand Licitra's "Recondita armonia," from the same opera, was convincing, with a sense of a warm vision, and a lovely attenuation of the last of the final phrase, "Tosca, sei tu!," spinning the note down finely. Also, Pinkerton's "Addio, fiorito asil" (*Madama Butterfly*) was affecting, intensifying at the second stanza, a case where Licitra got his heart as well as his body into the piece.

The troubles he was dealing with Sunday, the cold and whatever else, surfaced seriously in the fourth and final aria of the program's opening half, Manrico's "Ah si, ben mio...Di quella pira," when he began "marking" (half-singing) phrases during the cabaletta, and then all but came a cropper stabbing up to the ultimate high C (now an obligatory tradition). In the last aria that was programmed, Riccardo's "Ma se m'è forza perdeti," (Verdi's *Un Ballo in Maschera*), ironically, by the time he reached the final section starting "Like some fated compulsion, as if this should be the last hour of our love," the vocal die was cast. He was having problems. When the audience applauded at the cadence marking the end of this part of the scene, Licitra signaled Agler "basta!" and did not complete the scene as planned. His voice would just not respond. (At this point in the opera, the offstage *banda* strikes up, the page Oscar appears with the invitation to the fateful ball, departs, and then Riccardo, left to himself, resumes, "Che ne ballo alcuno...") After this shortened scene, Licitra sang just one encore, the popular ballad "Torna a Sorriento," and passed over the three others that had been prepared.

Segué between selections

At two other points earlier, the program connected interlude pieces to arias. Following the "Recondita armonia," Agler led the orchestra in the prelude to Act III of *Tosca*, the dawn over

the city of Rome and the roof platform of Castel Sant'Angelo. This included the Shepherd's song, in a lovely, sweetly drawn performance by Michael Barnett, boy soprano, who has sung this in SF Opera performances and was trained in the SF Boys Chorus. Agler skipped over the Jailer-Cavaradossi interchange and Licitra walked onstage for "E lucevan le stelle." Similarly after Agler led the "Dawn Music" introduction to Act III, Licitra walked on and sang the "Addio, fiorito asil."

While Agler was a close and tactful conductor accompanying Licitra, he wafted through the *La Forza del Destino* Overture and Prelude to *Un Ballo in Maschera* with large gestures, indifferent to the dramatic tensions in the music, giving it about 6 volts (one AA battery's worth). The SF Opera orchestra played handsomely all the same and so finely, one would not guess that many of the string players were substitutes and that several of the regular principals were absent. Carey Bell played the clarinet solos in the *La Forza del Destino* aria beautifully and the cello quartet in "E lucevan le stelle" was gorgeous. They inspired the renewed wish that the SF Opera would produce opera concerts again.

The event was a special for Cal Performances, but its director, Robert Cole had booked Licitra for his recital debut *before* his emergency filling-in-for-Pavarotti last May. Perhaps later, Cole's foresight was capitalized upon, the event mounted as a gala for the patrons (with a dinner following the concert). Perhaps in the flush of the later publicity and Licitra's subsequent success, the full orchestra was engaged. So Cal Performances did for a newcomer what it hadn't done when mounting concerts (with piano accompaniment) for the likes of Cecilia Bartoli.

(Robert P. Commanday, the editor of San Francisco Classical Voice, was the music critic of The San Francisco Chronicle, 1965-93, and before that a conductor and lecturer at the University of California, Berkeley.)

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