

Salt Marsh Opera presents La Sonnambula

Published: Wednesday, October 12, 2011

By Robert C. Pollack, Special to the Times

OLD SAYBROOK – When British-born Salt Marsh Opera Artistic Director Simon Holt helped launch the company 11 years ago, he had no idea it would blossom into a vehicle that would produce packed houses and critical acclaim.

But that is exactly what has happened as standing ovations for its production of Vincenzo Bellini's "La Sonnambula" (The Sleepwalker) at the George Kent Performance Hall in Westerly, RI, last week revealed.

Now, after two performances in Westerly, the same bel canto style opera is headed to the Katherine Hepburn Cultural Arts Center here next Friday, Oct. 21 at 8 p.m. and Sunday, Oct. 23 at 3 p.m.

Sung in Italian with English super titles, the two-act "La Sonnambula" is a glittering operatic fantasy that features what has been described as "a tender score" with an innocent story about a peasant sleepwalker – hauntingly lyrical as it is visual.

"We audition both locally and in New York," Holt said last week, "attract top talent and this season's production is no exception."

The Salt Marsh Opera revival features an ensemble of debut and encore performers, joined by a 22-piece orchestra and chorus. Returning to the stage in the role of the innocent sleepwalker Amina is Sarah Callinan, soprano, and portraying Teresa is Erika Person, mezzo soprano.

Making their Salt Marsh Opera debuts are tenor Timothy Birt as Elvino, the wealthy landowner, baritone Michael Reder as the long lost village lord, soprano Christin Wismann as Lisa, the inn hostess and baritone Michael Scarcelle as Alessio.

Holt, who has won acclaim as an organist – "I selected it as my instrument of choice as a child in England because of its great power and versatility" – has devoted his life to music and hopes The Kate will be the home for many future productions.

"Two years ago we held an outdoor concert to promote the first opera we were to perform there – "Die Fledermaus" – and were amazed when some 1,400 people showed up."

That opera sold out and he is hoping for the same response for "The Sleepwalker."

Callinan was asked how it felt to discover after the fact that she had sleep walked into the bed of a visiting count – a key aspect of the opera.

She laughed and said: "My character (Amina) has no idea what she is doing." And on a more serious note, she added: "It is the music in this opera that makes it soar. It is melodious and magnificent and a joy to sing."

Callinan started her singing career in musical theater, but soon was lured by the magical power of opera and – "with a few detours" – has been doing it ever since.

"La Sonnambula" unfolds in a 19th century Swiss village where the betrothal of Amina to Elvino is celebrated by all except Lisa, the innkeeper, who had hoped to marry Elvino herself.

When a stranger arrives, who is actually Count Rodolfo, lord of the castle; he pays attention to Amina and arouses Elvino's jealousy.

That night, Rodolfo retires to Lisa's inn where she visits his room and leaves a handkerchief. While walking in her sleep, Amina later enters Rodolfo's room and is found in his bed the next morning. Although the Count protests Amina's innocence, Elvino breaks off the engagement and decides to marry Lisa. In another sleepwalking state, Amina appears at the mill where the Count explains somnambulism and, to everyone's satisfaction, Elvino awakens her and begs forgiveness.

But plot details don't do justice to Vincenzo Bellini's magnificent score and the energy and just plain talent of the Salt Marsh Opera cast.

Tickets for "La Sonnambula" at the Katharine Hepburn Cultural Arts Center are available from \$55 to \$65 by calling The Kate box office at 877-503-1286 or at www.thekate.org.

Editor's Note: Founded in 2000 and based in Stonington, the Salt Marsh Opera defines itself as "opera for the community" The company has broadened its role in the region's arts and entertainment scene with sold out productions including Die Fledermaus, Lucia di Lammermoor, Madama Butterfly, Tosca, La bohème, La traviata and Il barbiere di Siviglia. Salt Marsh Opera also presents concerts, operatic soirees, and lectures. for the community" The company has broadened its role in the region's arts and entertainment scene with sold out productions including Die Fledermaus, Lucia di Lammermoor, Madama Butterfly, Tosca, La bohème, La traviata and Il barbiere di Siviglia. Salt Marsh Opera also presents concerts, operatic soirees, and lectures.