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 The Middle East's First *Norma*

Beirut

Al Bustan International Festival of Music and the Performing Arts

02/26/2015 - & February 28, 2015

Vincenzo Bellini: *Norma*

Carmen Giannattasio (Norma), Nino Surguladze (Adalgisa), Arturo Chacon-Cruz (Pollione), Gocha Datusani (Oroveso)

Choirs of Antonine University and Notre Dame University of Louaize, Father Khalil Rahmé (chorus master), The State Youth Orchestra of Armenia, Gianluca Marciandò (conductor)



C. Giannattasio

Opera is a scarcely ploughed field of endeavor in Beirut. The city's traditional opera house, located on the edge of the "green line" that divided the city through Lebanon's painful civil war, is now a Virgin MegaStore. The opera houses of Cairo, Istanbul, and, more recently, Muscat offer regular performance seasons that cultivated Lebanese should envy. Dubai is currently building its own venue to add to its diverse amusements. Metropolitan Opera HDTV telecasts started to come to one of Beirut's cinemas a couple of seasons ago, and beleaguered fans contend with the country's notoriously bad internet service (rated worst in the world in 2013) to listen to streamed radio broadcasts from almost anywhere else. Only once or twice a year does one of the country's intrepid music festivals venture a full performance for a cultivated public that by all accounts would like more.

It goes without saying that almost any opera staged in Lebanon would be the country's first and, often, the region's first. This year it was Bellini's *Norma*, put on in concert by the Al Bustan Festival. Perhaps Lebanon's most

venerable musical establishment, it offers an array of concerts and recitals featuring international artists. Most performances are given in the auditorium of the Al Bustan hotel, a well appointed locale in the Christian mountain suburb of Beit Meri.

A cosmopolitan combination of artistic forces gathered for this performance. Soloists of high international repute shared the stage with the State Youth Orchestra of Armenia and the local choirs of Lebaon's own Antonine University and University of Notre Dame of Louaize. The effort was bold and delectably successful. Rising Italian soprano Carmen Giannattasio rolled out effortless charm and a fine chest voice that soared to thrilling heights in the title role. There were moments, particularly in some of the duets, when the voice sounded edgy and sharp, but this happened too seldom to mar the performance in any serious way. Paired with mezzo Nino Surguladze's simmering Adalgisa, the casting was worthy of any major European or North American operatic stage. Arturo Chacon-Cruz added his promising talent as Pollione, the lover of both female characters. A finely tuned instrument resounded in this challenging tenor part, scaling to impressive heights and adding spine chilling verve to the trio that precedes the stretta finale of Act I. The stentorian bass Gocha Datusani contributed a muscular Oroveso.

Gianluca Marcianò led a rousing performance from the talented young musicians of the State Youth Orchestra of Armenia. The local student choirs of Antonine University and Notre Dame de Louaize added a firmly disciplined reading of the choral parts under their director, Father Khalil Rahmé.

Paul du Quenoy