

Review

A Masked Ball, Peterborough Opera: 27 & 28 Oct, Queen Victoria Hall, Oundle

Have a ball with lesser known Verdi

by Joe Conway

This production of an English-language version of Verdi's *Un Ballo in Maschera* reflected immense credit on everyone involved in it. From the soloists and company on stage to the orchestra in the pit, and from the costume designers to the lighting crew. In this review however I want to focus on two people absolutely essential to this show.

One, needless to say, is Giuseppe Verdi himself. The composer of unforgettable operas like *Aida*, *La Traviata*, and *Rigoletto*, as well as the monumental *Requiem*, Verdi is not a composer to indulge in subtleties. Everything is straightforward, direct, and to the point, whether it's music that moves the

audience to tears or stirs them with its majesty and grandeur.

Un Ballo is one of the Italian composer's lesser known works and lacks the world-famous tunes found in his more celebrated operas. Nevertheless, it bristles with passion as it lifts the lid on political intrigue, plus an assassination, a forbidden love affair and, of course, a masked ball. Here Verdi's ability to drive the narrative forward is second to none, and the tragic climax approaches inexorably and rapidly.

Also helping to drive things forward was conductor Kate Wishart who's the other person I want to single out. Kate's exemplary conducting was a joy

to watch throughout the length of the opera. Her economical stick-technique helped not only the 19-piece band but also the singers on stage to achieve precision and accuracy. Clear upbeats, gestures to finish off phrases, sensible speeds, and an intimate knowledge of the score were the factors that she contributed, effectively holding the show together.

Among the soloists Ami Walsh as the sorceress Ulrica was particularly convincing, ultra-dramatic, and totally immersed in her role. Very secure musically, her mezzo-soprano voice easily rode over the orchestra in a blood-curdling fashion that was just right for the part.

It's Ulrica who predicts that Prince Riccardo, diligently played by Mark Ellse,

will be killed by the next person to shake his hand. This turns out to be his secretary Renato, brought to life in a hard-working performance by Martin Muir. As his wife Amelia, Liz Williams took on the poignant role of the Victorian fallen woman with ever-increasing commitment and conviction. The principals apart, sopranos Anna Muirgatroyd and Lyndsey Evans were outstanding as two footmen with surprisingly important roles. As was Mike Hammond's persistent sailor. Meanwhile members of the orchestra contributed a luscious cor anglais solo and some distinguished flute, cello, and harp playing.

You can see *A Masked Ball* on 4 Nov, at St Thomas a Becket Church, Ramsey, and 5 Nov, The Key Theatre.

