

Licitra recital offers hints of greatness

Acclaimed tenor reveals strength in low notes

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So is Salvatore Licitra the fourth tenor? Not at all. On the alluring evidence of his American concert debut in Berkeley's Zellerbach Hall on Sunday night, he is something much more valuable: a tremendously promising young artist still gaining control of his considerable gifts.

Whether that will suffice for the insatiable marketing arm of the classical music industry is another question, and a somewhat unsettling one. Ever since his headline-grabbing substitution for an ailing Luciano

Pavarotti at the Metropolitan Opera last year, the 34-year-old Italian has been rushed into the international limelight with almost unseemly haste.

The Berkeley recital, presented by the ever-prescient folks at Cal Performances, suggested that the breathless buzz surrounding Licitra is not unwarranted, merely premature. If he is allowed the time and freedom to develop fully, there's no reason why he shouldn't emerge as one of today's leading tenors.

In a program of Verdi and Puccini arias (with de Curtis' perennial "Torna a Surriento" as a lone encore) Licitra displayed a wealth of vocal endowments coupled with a dramatic sensibility that is still under construction.

His voice is rich and muscular, with a dark, baritonal quality that is worlds removed from the seemingly effortless buoyancy of Pavarotti or of Licitra's teacher Carlo Bergonzi. The lower register is his strongest arena, and passages that lay there -- including parts of the introduction to "O tu che in seno agli angeli" from "La Forza del Destino" and especially the opening of "E lucevan le stelle" from "Tosca" -- were delivered with a burnished gleam that was enthralling.

His high notes, by contrast, are elaborately cantilevered affairs, belted out with an impressive sense of effort. They don't always land squarely -- the traditional but unwritten high C at the end of "Di quella pira" from "Il Trovatore" was a strenuous misstep -- but when they do, they ring out powerfully with a vibrant impact.

Just as important, Licitra invested each selection with interpretive fluency and stylistic assurance that seemed to come naturally to him. His fluid, honeyed phrasing in "Addio fiorito asil" from "Madama Butterfly" helped give the aria an agile freshness that his weighty vocal tone might otherwise have limited, and his rendition of "Ah, la paterna mano" from "Macbeth" offered a potent blend of heroism and emotional urgency.

Licitra seemed somewhat ill at ease all evening, which may have been due to a cold that he was reportedly fighting. Although no announcement was made, he ran into trouble midway through his final offering, "Ma se m'e forza perderti" from "Un Ballo in Maschera," and cut off the performance at the halfway point.

Still, cold or no, this was an impressive introduction to an artist from whom even greater achievements can be expected. He was accompanied by members of the San Francisco Opera Orchestra under the blunt direction of conductor David Agler.

For the opening of Act 3 of "Tosca," the Bay Area's own boy soprano Michael Bannett supplied a radiant account of the shepherd's song. It's a part he has sung before at the San Francisco Opera, but never with such tonal bloom or heart-breaking precision.

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