



Review: Mary Stuart resonates with emotional sovereignty

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This Examiner Rates *Mary Stuart*:



While in negotiations with the reigning queen of a royal dynasty, calling the sovereign ruler a “lowborn whore” is generally considered a bad idea. Should the offended queen happen to be England’s Elizabeth I and should the offender happen to be Mary Stuart, a hotly contested rival for the coveted throne, utterances of such disrespect virtually guarantee a death sentence. And yet, as depicted in Italian composer Gaetano Donizetti’s emotionally stirring opera, *Mary Stuart*, the slander seals a regal victory, consequences be damned. Told with emphatic poignancy, the Minnesota Opera’s staging of *Mary Stuart*, now running at the Ordway Center, captures an absolutely searing struggle for moral supremacy.

The second of Donizetti’s Tudor Trilogy to be produced by the Minnesota Opera in recent years (*Roberto Devereux* played in 2010, *Anna Bolena* is planned for a future season), *Mary Stuart* centers on the deadly clash of Elizabeth I and the title character. The deposed queen of Scotland and second cousin of Elizabeth I, Mary Stuart was jailed by the English monarch to prevent a threat to her crown. Enlisting a historically fanciful libretto by Giuseppe Bardari, *Mary Stuart* dramatically fictionalizes Mary’s final fate,

recounting how Elizabeth I’s rampant jealousy and distrust led the former Queen of Scots to the executioner’s block. Plot-wise the work offers few twists and turns, opting instead to focus on the excruciating travails of Mary Stuart’s final days.

With the focus so directed on the combative queens, *Mary Stuart* is utterly dependent on the two leads. With Judith Howarth as Mary Stuart and Brenda Harris as Elizabeth I, audiences are assured an evening of soprano virtuosos. Howarth is a marvel of vocal dexterity, imbuing her sweeping range with evocative feeling. Especially striking is Howarth’s remarkable skill at sustaining notes into her highest register, before bending her timbre as an expression of Stuart’s angst. Not to be outdone, Harris gives Elizabeth a regal bearing that crumbles in private as her hidden insecurities rise to the surface. Pitch perfect, Harris exhibits a flawless legato with a naturalism that perfectly exemplifies the Bel Canto form.

The dueling queens are supported by an exemplary cast, particularly two performers playing nobles of the court. Bruce Sledge’s rich tenor gives weight to the wounded affections of Robert, Earl of Leicester’s convictions. And when paired with Howarth, the two performers capture the melody of Donizetti’s impassioned score. Jonathan Kimple is similarly moving as Talbot, Earl of Shrewsbury, especially in his Act II absolution of Mary, wherein Kimple’s commanding bass-baritone provides heart and soul to the moment.

Whereas the work’s first act deals primarily with Mary Stuart ensuring her dire fate, the second act plays like an extended funeral dirge. Utilizing the full force of the Minnesota Opera Chorus, the unleashed pathos swells to encompass the entire auditorium. The stunning effect is like a cathartic release, a collective mourning for an inescapable tragedy.

Throughout the production conductor Anne Manson leads the Minnesota Opera Orchestra with a steady hand, driving the nuance of Donizetti’s composition with assured conviction. Each movement flows into the next, transforming from a raging storm to a receding calm with mesmerizing grace.

Reuniting the creative team behind *Roberto Devereux*, *Mary Stuart* feels like a thematic companion. As with that previous production, director Kevin Newbury vigorously alternates between sweeping choral moments and intimate private lamentations. Such range is further displayed by a costume design from Jessica Jahn which parades the gilded attire of Elizabeth against the formal drabness of her court.

Also remarkable is the inspired pairing of Neil Patel’s set design with D. M. Wood’s lighting design. Both artists have carried over motifs from *Roberto Devereux*, particularly looming backdrops, imposing grandeur, and striking use of the color red. Rather than merely repeating past designs, however, Patel and Wood have improved upon the previous work, showing an uncanny ability to shift a scene’s atmosphere through subtle visual cues.

Far from the stale recitation of a history lesson, the Minnesota Opera breathes fresh life into *Mary Stuart* by focusing on the wounded heart at the work’s core. That such a wounded heart is made to beat with such emotional vitality is the ultimate achievement of this superb production.

Mary Stuart runs through February 6th.