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Novaya Opera Launches 7th Epiphany Week Fest

By Raymond Stults

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The festival sees Novaya Opera's revival of Verdi's "Rigoletto" on Jan. 28.

Novaya Opera is set once again to relieve the post-holiday gloom with its seventh annual Epiphany Week festival, which in fact runs not for a week, but for slightly more than two weeks. The program put together for the festival, which begins Saturday and concludes on Jan. 30, looks to be one of unusual interest. Included in it are a new production of a little-known one-act operetta by Jacques Offenbach, performances in concert form of operas by Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov, Antonin Dvorak and Gioacchino Rossini — in all cases new to the theater's repertoire — and the reprise of the company's decade-old staging of Giuseppe Verdi's "Rigoletto," featuring notable guest artists from Britain and Italy.

The Epiphany Week festival honors the memory of Novaya Opera's much-revered founder, Yevgeny Kolobov, who was born 64 years ago on Jan. 19, the date of the Feast of Epiphany on the calendar of the Russian Orthodox Church, when it celebrates the baptism of Christ and its clergy deliver what is known as the Great Blessing of Water.

“M. Chouflouri restera chez lui le...” (literally, “Mr. Cauliflower will be at home on the...,” but retitled by Novaya Opera “A Dinner Party with Italians”) is one of 98 musical comedies composed by Offenbach during his reign as the king of operetta in Second Empire France. Set to a frivolous libretto largely written by the Duc de Morny, the illegitimate half-brother of Emperor Napoleon III, it is said to contain some delightful parodies of mid-19th-century Italian opera.

Directing the operetta will be Irkutsk-based Gennady Shaposhnikov, who, at the Epiphany Week festival two years ago, came up with a wonderfully madcap staging of Giacomo Puccini’s one-act comic masterpiece “Gianni Schicchi” — a Golden Mask nominee in 2010 — that Novaya Opera has chosen to accompany “M. Chouflouri restera chez lui le...” at the festival performance on Sunday. Judging from its libretto, the latter should provide Shaposhnikov yet again with an excellent opportunity to display his skill at bizarre comic invention.

Starting off the festival on Saturday will be a concert performance of Rimsky-Korsakov’s very first opera, “The Maid of Pskov,” which was last seen and heard in Moscow at a short-lived revival by the Bolshoi Theater in the late 1990s. Based loosely on historical fact, it tells of the expedition by Tsar Ivan the Terrible in 1570 to subdue the rebellious city of Pskov and centers around the Tsar’s discovery there of a long-lost daughter, Princess Olga Tokmakova, the maid of the title. The opera is by no means top-drawer Rimsky-Korsakov, but it does contain a number of good tunes and opportunities for virtuosic vocal display by the lead soprano (Princess Olga) and lead bass (Tsar Ivan).

Dvorak’s “Rusalka” (The Mermaid) has enjoyed much popularity in recent times on major opera stages throughout the world. But until now, Moscow has known it only by way of a 2005 Helikon Opera production that hardly does justice to its beautifully crafted retelling of a story by Hans Christian Andersen and its gloriously melodic score.

Leading “Rusalka” at the performance on Jan. 22 will be veteran maestro Vladimir Fedoseyev, a great favorite with Moscow audiences for his superb leadership over the past 37 years of the Tchaikovsky Symphony Orchestra, but who is rarely given an opportunity here to conduct opera, for which he has been widely hailed in theaters of Western Europe. Also rare, at least in recent times, have been appearances by soprano Yelena Zelenskaya, one of Kolobov’s most important vocal discoveries of the 1990s, who is due to sing the opera’s title role.

The Epiphany Week festival closes on Jan. 30 with a concert performance of “La Ceneretola,” Rossini’s delectably tuneful setting of the Cinderella story, which, if it matches in stylishness the theater’s handling of another great Rossini comic opera, “The Barber of Seville,” should provide considerable pleasure.

The performance of “Rigoletto” on Jan. 28 brings to the title role Roberto Frontali, an Italian baritone of worldwide renown, and to the orchestra pit British conductor Jan Latham-Koenig, familiar to Novaya Opera audiences for his sterling leadership of Richard Wagner’s “Lohengrin,” Verdi’s “Nabucco” and Benjamin Britten’s “War Requiem.”

Also on the festival program are two gala concerts, the first (Jan. 23) devoted to music of George Gershwin under the baton of the formidable Estonian maestro and Novaya Opera chief conductor Eri Klas; the second (Jan. 29) featuring soprano Yelena Popovskaya, one of the most

accomplished among the theater's very strong company of singers, in music of Wagner, Richard Strauss and Puccini.

As it has done in the past, the festival will mark the birthday of Yevgeny Kolobov on Jan. 19 with a program of romances by Pyotr Tchaikovsky and Sergei Rachmaninov sung to Kolobov's own arrangements for orchestra of the original piano accompaniments.

Full information about Epiphany Week at Novaya Opera can be found at www.novayaopera.ru.

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