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Novaya Opera to Run Epiphany Week Fest

By Raymond Stults

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“This Is Opera,” a mix of great arias and ensembles, is running during Novaya Opera’s Epiphany Week festival.

For the eighth year in a row, the end of the January holidays will bring with it the beginning of Novaya Opera's Epiphany Week festival, honoring the memory of the theater's revered founder, Yevgeny Kolobov, and running, as always, beyond the span of a mere seven days.

The festival takes its title from the Feast of Epiphany, celebrated by the Russian Orthodox on Jan. 19, which also happens to be the date on which Maestro Kolobov was born in Leningrad some 65 years ago.

Starting on Jan. 11 and continuing until Jan. 29, the upcoming Epiphany Week program includes seven complete operas, three of them in concert form and new to the theater — Jules Massenet's "Thais," Giuseppe Verdi's "I Lombardi alla prima crociata" ("The Lombards on the First Crusades") and Modest Mussorgsky's "Khovanshchina" — the other four — "La

Cenerentola" ("Cinderella") and "The Barber of Seville" of Gioacchino Rossini, plus Alexander Borodin's "Prince Igor" and Verdi's "La Traviata" — in fully staged versions drawn from Novaya Opera's existing repertoire.

The festival opens with "Thais," which dates from 1894 and last appeared in Moscow in a short-lived 1998 production at the Stanislavsky and Nemirovich-Danchenko Musical Theater. Based on a novel by Anatole France and set in Egypt under Byzantine rule, it tells of the attempt by a monk named Athanael to convert to Christianity the Thais of the title, a courtesan of Alexandria and worshipper of Venus.

On the podium to conduct Massenet's lushly evocative score will be distinguished British maestro Jan Latham-Koenig, appointed last April as Novaya Opera's principal conductor, and singing the extraordinarily difficult title role will be soprano Sonya Yoncheva, a guest from Bulgaria, who last year took first prize in Placido Domingo's prestigious Operalia vocal competition and has gone on to win considerable acclaim on both sides of the Atlantic.

"I Lombardi" (Jan. 22) was the fourth of Verdi's 26 operas and is seldom to be heard anywhere these days. Set in Milan and the Middle East in the years 1196-97, its story plays fast and loose with historical fact and concerns itself mostly with matters of love, betrayal and mistaken identity. It contains many fine tunes, including a series of those rousing choruses that play such an important part in the composer's earlier operas.

A pillar of the Russian operatic repertoire, "Khovanshchina" (Jan. 26) has been absent from the Moscow stage since the demise, after very few performances, of a rather uninspired production at the Bolshoi Theater nine years ago. Like "I Lombardi," "Khovanshchina" (Jan. 26) deals with historical events but treats them with greater accuracy. Set in the early years of Peter the Great's reign, its tale intertwines elements of the "conspiracy of the princes" to overthrow the young tsar with those of the schism of the so-called Old Believers that simultaneously rocked the Orthodox Church.

Of the four fully staged operas on the festival program, "The Barber of Seville" (Jan. 29) is certainly the prize of the lot, thanks to the wonderfully comical and gimmick-free staging given it in 2008 by the celebrated British director Elijah Moshinsky. For its festival performance, Novaya Opera is importing a trio of guests from Italy, including noted mezzo-soprano Daniela Barcellona for the role of Rosina.

The other Rossini opera, "La Cenerentola" (Jan. 21), presents more difficult challenges musically and dramatically. At the production's premiere earlier this season, Novaya Opera handled it adequately in both respects. But its most notable feature was the stunning array of 3-D video art that formed its backdrop.

"Prince Igor" (Jan. 13), new at last year's festival, has been strongly cast from what is probably the finest roster of singers of any opera house in Moscow and, for the most part, boasts a powerful staging, marred only by the rather silly and outrageously extravagant handling of its second-act scene in the camp of Prince Igor's Polovtsian enemies. "La traviata" (Jan. 15), which premiered in 1999, features an exciting modern-dress staging by choreographer Alla Sigalova and Kolobov's much-criticized rearrangement of its musical score.

Completing the festival's operatic agenda is Novaya Opera's potpourri of arias and ensembles called "This Is Opera" (Jan. 28), which premiered last March in celebration of the theater's 20th anniversary.

Finally, in what has become an Epiphany Week tradition, Yevgeny Kolobov's birthday on Jan. 19 will be commemorated with an evening of romances by Pyotr Tchaikovsky and Sergei Rachmaninov performed with Kolobov's own orchestral transcriptions of the original piano accompaniments.

Novaya Opera is located at 3 Karetny Ryad. Metro Chekhovskaya, Mayakovskaya. Tel. (495) 694-0868. www.novayaopera.ru

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