

Q&A with Rebecca Herman, Concert Stage Director

Verdi's *Otello* may very well be the greatest of all Italian Romantic operas. From the pedigree of its source material to the unrivaled quality of its libretto, *Otello* breathes out importance and artistic accomplishment at every turn. But it is Verdi's music, of course, that gives eternal immediacy to Shakespeare's timeless tragedy and searing poignancy to Boito's fluent script.

What about *Otello* lends itself to a staged concert version? I think there are two main elements that make *Otello* exciting to present as a staged concert. The first is Verdi's music. Verdi was such a master of orchestration and theater, his music creates the entire world that this story inhabits, from the external storm that starts the opera to the inner turmoil and unease of Desdemona as she prepares for bed at the top of Act IV. The orchestra is really a whole character in and of itself and to feature the Austin Opera Orchestra on stage for the audience to see as part of the drama is thrilling.

The second reason is that *Otello*, at its heart, is a psychological drama of manipulation, jealousy, and love. Those larger themes come across in a staged concert just as well as a traditionally staged production. With world class singing actors like Marina Costa-Jackson, Michael Chioldi, and Issachah Savage, I know the drama will grab hold of the audience and keep them on the edge of their seat for the whole night.

What is the process you used to develop the staging?

I am very lucky to be collaborating with Maestro Steven White on this production. He has already done a staged concert version of *Otello* and his knowledge and experience has provided a wonderful resource for me to use as a jumping off point. From there it's all about studying the score and the text just like I would any other production and really figuring out what each character is trying to accomplish in each scene and with each line. The conversations I have with the artists will be very similar to what I would have in a traditional setting.

One of the more interesting challenges is figuring out what few hand props might enhance the performance. For example, the handkerchief is so integral to the show and symbolic of all three of the big themes (manipulation, jealousy, and love) that it seems worth having. But even though there is a big drinking scene, giving the singers drinks and props becomes sloppy and distracts from the drama. Finding the right balance is key.

What are some directing principles to live by, especially when directing a staged concert?

I think the biggest "principle" I live by as a director, whether the production is in a small intimate setting, a big hall like the Long Center, or a staged concert is the idea of active listening. I always approach characters and operas by humanizing the roles – so we can recognize and connect to them in some way. At the heart of it, acting is all about listening to the line before yours and then responding.

What are you most excited about?

Austin Opera has done an amazing job casting this show from top to bottom. I feel very lucky to be working with such a top-notch cast of singers who I know are going to pour their heart and soul into every moment of the process.

I am also looking forward to collaborating with Thomas Hase as the lighting designer for this show. Lighting is such an amazing tool for creating the mood of the drama and giving focus and clarity to a stage picture. Thinking about how we enhance and support the human psychological drama through the lighting design has been an unexpected treat.

Do you have a particular favorite aria or scene from Otello?

There are so many to choose from, honestly. And if you asked me next week, my answer will be different. But today, I'll say the love duet from Act I, "Già nella notte densa s'estingue ogni clamor". It serves to solidify the lovers in our mind and makes us root for them even as we know the inevitable outcome of the story. Other close seconds are Iago's "Credo" which is such an amazing tour de force for any baritone as well as the "Ave Maria" for Desdemona.