

Pittsburgh Opera NEWS RELEASE

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Singing Maestro Saves Pittsburgh Opera's "Aida"

Pittsburgh Opera's Music Director, Antony Walker, took over from an ailing Vladimir Kuzmenko as Radamès in the company's performance of "Aida" on April 1. But he did it from the podium—while conducting. This is probably the first time that a conductor has sung a leading role in an opera performance from the pit.

Around 3 PM Kuzmenko notified Artistic Director Christopher Hahn that he would need to see a doctor. Swinging into action, Hahn engaged Eduardo Villa to cover the evening's 7 PM performance. In an unusual move, the Metropolitan Opera released Villa from his covering assignment. He booked a flight from New York scheduled to arrive about halfway through the performance, since Kuzmenko's doctor felt that he would at least be able to begin the performance.

Indeed, Kuzmenko sang well through Act I (though he omitted 'Celeste Aida'). The weather gods were not with Villa, however, for the tenor was still in the air at the beginning of the second intermission. With the brave Kuzmenko's voice finally in tatters, Hahn asked Walker if he could sing the final act. Walker, who had been mentally preparing himself for this moment since the beginning of the evening, made a few warm-up noises and returned to the pit.

While a microphone was being rigged for Walker, who would sing while facing away from the audience, Hahn announced to the astonished audience, orchestra, and chorus that Walker would sing the role of Radamès. Cheers and applause broke out. Patrons in the balcony strained for a view of the miraculous doings in the pit.

As the curtain rose on Act IV, Kuzmenko gamely lip-synched the "Judgment" and "Tomb" scenes with his Aida, Eszter Sümegi, and mezzo-soprano Jane Dutton as Amneris. Dutton herself was replacing Stephanie Blythe, an earlier victim of the same virus. Walker's lyric tenor worked well for the final, most intimate scene of the opera. Although he and Sümegi had never sung the

final duet before and were separated by the orchestra pit, Walker still felt the connection he had built with Sümegi during rehearsals coming into play.

“It was an amazing experience,” Walker said afterwards. “I could feel the orchestra and the audience were with me. And I hope I never have to do that again!” Walker, an Australian conductor who studied voice for seven years, still sings occasionally for friends with his fiancée, mezzo-soprano Penelope Mills. “But don’t expect to hear me in an opera house again any time soon.”

Pittsburgh Opera has engaged Stephen O’Mara, an experienced Radamès, to sing the performance on Friday, April 4 and to cover the April 6 matinee. Jane Dutton will again substitute for Stephanie Blythe for the Friday performance, but Blythe is scheduled to sing on Sunday.

Links:

Antony Walker

<http://www.antonywalker.com/>

Pittsburgh Opera’s AIDA page

<http://www.pittsburghopera.org/0708season/aida.shtml>

Stephen O’Mara

<http://www.pinnaclearts.com/artist.php?id=545>

Conductor does double duty as tenor loses voice by Andrew Druckenbrod, Pittsburgh *Post-Gazette* (4/2/08)

<http://www.post-gazette.com/pg/08093/869798-388.stm>

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