



NOVEMBER 15, 2006 - LA TRAVIATA IN BEIJING

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On October 24 I took a noon time flight of Cathay Pacific to Beijing via **Hong Kong**. I had an unfortunate incident with Cathay in the **Hong Kong** airport which will not be part of today's article. I arrived very tired past midnight to Beijing to a chilly night with temperatures at six or seven degrees Celsius and, to the Poly Plaza Hotel at way past one in the morning.

This hotel had been recommended to me by my very good friend Peter Wong. He also purchased the tickets for the three performances I was attending of the 2006 Beijing Music Festival, their ninth festival. This autumn music festival offers various types of performances such as symphonic concerts, opera productions, recitals, chamber music concerts, classical jazz music concerts and musicals.

The festival opened on October 2 with a concert performance by the Mariinsky Orchestra & chorus and opera soloists in a program of compositions by Russian composers and closed on October 29 with a performance of Verdi's "La Traviata" as performed by the orchestra, chorus and soloists of the La Fenice Opera from Venice.

Throughout the four week period concerts were held by the Mariinsky Orchestra & chorus, pianists Maruizio Pollini, Paul Badura Skoda, Barry Douglas, Rossina Grieco, Jacques Taddei and Xu Zhong, the Piccolo Teatro di Milano, singers Ekaterina Semenchuk, Daniil Shtoda, Metodie Buzhor, Larissa Gergieva, Elena Semenova, Nicola Pascoli, Susana Denes, Zheng Cao, Hao Jian Tian, **Luz del alba**, Dario Schumunch and Valdimir Stoyanov, violinists Augustin Dumay and Maxim Rysanov, cellist Jian Wang, Mixcha Maisky String Trio, Natalie Chee and the Camerata Salzburg, Sian Edwards and the Ensemble Modern, the China Peking Opera, the Shanghai Opera Theatre, the Jiangsu Province Kunqu Opera, the BBC Symphony Orchestra, conductor Riccardo Muti and the China Philharmonic, the National Children's Orchestra of Great Britain, Divertimento Berlin from members of the Berliner Philharmoniker and the orchestra, chorus, soloists, director and conductor of the Teatro La Fenice from Venice, Italy.

Most of the performances were scheduled at the Poly Theater whose entrance was in the lobby of the Poly Plaza Hotel where I was staying. On October 26 in another venue American opera singer Jessye Norman was giving a recital.

Twenty years ago I attended a performance of "La Traviata" in the Grand Theatre, HK Cultural Centre where Peter Wong was singing in the chorus. On Oct. 26 I attended the Beijing performance of this same opera this time with Peter Wong sitting beside me in the third row of the stalls of the Poly Theater, a magnificent theater with wide orchestra seats that had very good leg room. Acoustics were very good. I returned for the Oct. 28 performance and this time I sat in the fifteenth third row. No surtitles were used.

**This production of "La Traviata" will be in the 2007 season at La Fenice with the same cast and sets. Uruguayan soprano Luz del Alba, who has won in several international vocal competitions, was singing the role of Violetta. She has a powerful and beautiful lyric soprano voice with coloratura abilities. Ms. Alba immerses herself into the role and sings and acts the part. Her voice has beauty and a variety of timber, certainty of intonation, an appearance and very good stage presence to make the last act very convincing. She even made her voice loose volume during the act. On both occasions she was rewarded with long ovations.**

Argentinian tenor Dario Schmunck who won the Second International Singing competition "Franco Corelli" in Ancona, Italy was Alfredo. He is a high lyric tenor and he negotiated all the difficulties of his arias with skill. He had previously sung this role in Vienna and in the La Fenice in Venice. He also has a beautiful voice and knows how to modulate it to give meaning to what he is singing. His acting was very convincing during the entire opera. On both occasions he also was rewarded with long ovations.

Bulgarian baritone Vladimir Stoyanov has a solid baritone voice. He sang with firmness but one noticed his lack of stage presence when compared to Ms. del Alba and Mr. Schmunck. He has sung in many theaters in Italy including La Scala. For his excellent singing, he was rewarded by the audience with loud and prolonged applause.

I have to mention that I was very pleasantly surprised to see how the audience showed their appreciation for the performance by applauding and even shouting bravo, brava and bravi. They certainly showed more enthusiasm than our Manila crowd that attends concerts, recitals and theatrical performances. Our only enthusiastic crowd is the ballet crowd.

Though Carlo del Marino's set design was stylized and minimalistic, Fabio Baretin's light design gave the correct mood for each scene. Bruno Aprea who has directed opera all over Europe, the USA, South America, South Africa, Japan and Israel, controlled the orchestra and chorus so that they would not drown the soloists.