



STAFF PHOTO / DAN WAGNER

Maria Knapik plays Halka and Benjamin Warschawski portrays Jontek in the Sarasota Opera's production of "Halka."

Opera's 'Halka' unveils a treasure

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Sarasota Opera has struck gold with the rarely heard "Halka" by Stanislaw Moniuszko.

Filled with thoroughly delightful music infused with the spirit of Polish folk tunes

and dance forms, it tells the story of a peasant girl, Halka, seduced and abandoned by the now-betrothed nobleman, Janusz. Despite the love of her longtime friend Jontek, Halka unravels with grief and kills herself during her beloved

PLEASE SEE HALKA ON 3E

Sarasota Opera performs a treasure in 'Halka'

HALKA FROM 1E

master's wedding ceremony.

Every element of this first professional production of the opera by an American company sparkles — from the stage direction by Pat Diamond and the music by Moniuszko to costumes, scenery, lighting and, much to everyone's delight, dance.

The Sarasota audience learned what the Poles have long known: Poland has a national treasure in "Halka."

Soprano Maria Knapik, who performs the title role, happens to be Polish. This may partially explain her success in the role, but more importantly, her rich, full voice was able to convey every step of the path from hopeful love dashed to despair. Graceful and at ease in the role, Knapik held our hearts in her hand.

Tenor Benjamin Warschawski (Jontek) was every bit as convincing and compelling. His strong and exciting voice

OPERA REVIEW

Halka

By the Sarasota Opera. Reviewed Feb. 3 at the Sarasota Opera House, 61 N. Pineapple Ave. Through March 3. Tickets are \$22 to \$109. Call 366-8450, Ext. 1, or access sarasotaopera.org.

moved us as it conveyed Jontek's anger and frustration at the mistreatment of his dear Halka by the nobility.

The actors playing nobles played their roles stiffly, as if they took a page from the Windsor family, but it may have been intentional. We felt very little compassion for Janusz, portrayed by Jonathan Carle with a splendid voice but remarkably little facial expression or inflection. Jeffrey Tucker's Stolnik was the proper noble father, and Courtney Ames as Zofia was a gracious young bride who was blind to the

faults of her groom.

This chasm of sympathy is the main point of this story of nobles' callousness and the demeaning, servile state of the peasantry. For this reason, and for the brilliantly folk-flavored score, "Halka" was banned for many years during periods of Russian occupation in Poland. To this day, the Polish people hold "Halka" close to their hearts, like a national anthem.

To emphasize the musical and cultural significance of the opera's Sarasota premiere, it is surrounded by a variety of cultural activities supported by the Polish-American community and the Polish Embassy to the United States. Polish Ambassador Janusz Reiter spoke before the curtain was raised on Saturday's performance.

Collaboration with the Lira Dancers of Chicago, a professional troupe of Polish folk dancers, resulted in some of the most delightful moments of the evening.

As nobility, the Lira Dancers

performed a polished polonaise; as peasants, they danced at least one mazurka that took the breath away with spins, jumps and other tricks choreographed by Ivana Puc.

Costumes were authentic and richly detailed by Howard Tsvi Kaplan and looked handsome within the inventive, mood-lending sets designed by Michael Schweikardt and lit by Ken Yunker.

The orchestra, truly not an afterthought although listed last, was excellent under the direction of David Neely.