

THE AGE
OPERA

Samson and Delilah ★★★

Melbourne Opera, Palais Theatre, June 1

Samson and Delilah is the quintessential grand opera – large scale, spectacular (with many choruses and two ballets) and requiring superb singers. Melbourne Opera's production – and music lovers should be grateful yet again for their vision and determination – unfortunately really had only the last.

The staging was deeply underplayed – deliberately so, according to the director's program notes, to emphasise psychological aspects (budget constraints might have been relevant). For me, it didn't work. The sets were far too minimalist, the lighting not even that, though Rose Chong's costumes were a highlight. The stage was divided into three, with the singers in front, the orchestra behind – which considerably reduced its impact – and the chorus above and behind them.

The outstanding contribution came from the principals, Deborah Humble and Rosario La Spina, and the chorus (which is always outstanding). La Spina's huge, sweet tenor was ideal for Samson, but the biggest moments belong to the mezzo Delilah, and Humble relished them: sensitive, seductive, superb. Simon Meadows, Jeremy Kleeman and Eddie Muliaumaseali'i were splendid in the minor roles, while conductor Raymond Lawrence was sympathetic to composer and singers.

The opera, which Camille Saint-Saëns (himself quite familiar with marital problems) takes from the Old Testament, tells of the Israelite leader who is seduced and betrayed by the vengeful Philistine Delilah. First performed in 1877, it was slow to bloom because of its biblical theme, but became immensely popular worldwide.

For the shortcomings, director Suzanne Chaundy – a leading force in so many of the company's recent triumphs, especially its series of Wagner operas – must take chief responsibility. The production was almost introverted, especially the climax where the blinded Samson pulls down the temple of the Philistine god Dagon, killing thousands. The bacchanal would scarcely have offended a women's temperance union. When Delilah came on stage brandishing Samson's shorn locks (the secret of his strength, symbolising his vow to God), they looked more like a dead possum.

Yet, despite imperfections, Melbourne's first Samson and Delilah in 40 years was a real pleasure.

Reviewed by Barney Zwartz