

CLASSICAL IN THE COUNTRY

## magic in Elora

Jul 14, 2008 04:30 AM

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CLASSICAL MUSIC CRITIC

ELORA—Nestled comfortably in the pastoral dales north of Guelph, the Elora Festival is a reliable cradle for fine midsummer musicmaking.

The 29th season received a rousing start over the weekend, beginning on Friday night with a performance of George Frideric Handel's grand 1748 oratorio *Solomon*, followed on Saturday by Black Umfolosi and capped last evening by New Zealand soprano Kiri Te Kanawa, who made a fresh stop on her farewell recital tour.

The diva's visit placed an international stamp of approval on the rural festival's unorthodox large-concert venue: A cavernous Wellington County roadworks barn (complete with broken asphalt floor) situated across the street from the Grand River racetrack and slots.

Te Kanawa's sold-out recital borrowed from the same program that Torontonians heard at Roy Thomson Hall last fall. But it's not every year that we get to hear *Solomon*, especially with soloists the calibre of soprano Karina Gauvin and young tenor Lawrence Williford.

Like the nearly month-long festival, which closes on Aug. 3, Friday's *Solomon* produced a mixed bag of styles, ranging from the fleet textures we might hear from a period-performance ensemble, to heavy Victorian-style melodrama.

There were many times on Friday that conductor (and Elora Festival artistic director) Noël Edison seemed to be channelling the ghost of Thomas Beecham, deeply mining the rich harmonies at a deliberate – if not downright poky – pace.

The Baroque-sized orchestra, playing modern instruments, was notably rough at times and baritone James Westman made a mess of the single solo he had to sing during the two-hour piece.

The Elora Festival singers and the soloists – which also included countertenor Robin Blaze and mezzo Jennifer Enns Modolo – erased those blots with gorgeously nuanced and shaped singing.

And, when the whole was going well, the experience rivalled any of the world's great summer festivals.

Gauvin, in gorgeous voice and full artistic bloom, gave everything as she sang with a particularly touching immediacy, which culminated in a riveting plea to Solomon to spare the life of her infant son.

The choir and orchestra had their finest moment in one of Handel's prettiest choruses, which protects the newlywed Solomon and the Queen with the injunction, "May no rash intruder disturb their soft hours."

It was so magical that even the rough-hewn venue felt bathed in a golden glow.

This week's best bets: Jazz crooner Laila Biali on Thursday night or tenor Colin Ainsworth singing Schubert's *Die Schöne Müllerin* on Saturday afternoon. For full festival information, visit [www.elorafestival.com](http://www.elorafestival.com).