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Romantic opera favourite to greet a new year

MATTHEW WESTWOOD THE AUSTRALIAN DECEMBER 30, 2014 12:00AM



Maija Kovalevska says the challenge 'always with Puccini is to (express) the emotions in a way that does not hurt the voice — the music is so powerful'. Picture: James Croucher Source: News Corp Australia

LATVIAN soprano Maija Kovalevska has exchanged a traditional white Christmas with her family in Riga for the newish custom of a New Year's Eve performance of La Boheme at the Sydney Opera House.

Since 2012, Opera Australia has presented the romantic favourite on December 31 in the Joan Sutherland Theatre. This year, the company has attracted Kovalevska to appear as the heroine Mimi, a role she has sung around the world, from the Royal Opera in London to the Vienna State Opera and the Metropolitan in New York.

"I would have to say, yes, it is my signature role," Kovalevska said yesterday as she was about to go on stage for a rehearsal. "Every time I perform it, I find something new in it."

Puccini's *La Boheme* is an enduring favourite with audiences: a story of young love and idealism, set among a group of bohemian artists in Paris. The first act, when seamstress Mimi and poet Rodolfo fall in love, is among the most romantic in all of opera. It all ends in heartbreak when Mimi dies from tuberculosis.

The opera is a true tearjerker, but Kovalevska said the genuine sobs should come from the auditorium, not the stage. "The challenge always with Puccini is to (express) the emotions in a way that does not hurt the voice," she said. "The music itself is so powerful that you need to be a little -

controlled.

“Too much emotion interferes with the voice.”

Kovalevska made her debut as Donna Elvira in Don Giovanni in Riga in 2003. Within a few years, Placido Domingo awarded her first prize in the Operalia World Opera Competition and her career took flight.

Among her other roles are the Countess in The Marriage of Figaro and Violetta in La Traviata.

In Sydney, she will appear opposite Mexican tenor Diego Torre as Rodolfo in Gale Edwards’s production of La Boheme, updated from 1830s Paris to Berlin during the Weimar Republic. Only a handful of tickets remained yesterday for tomorrow’s performance, but there are seven other performances until January 16. OA also presents a New Year’s Eve gala of opera highlights in the Concert Hall.

Kovalevska said she was enjoying her first Australian summer, and was given a taste of home when she was invited to Christmas dinner at the home of the Latvian consul.

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