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Review: Women astound in Dallas Opera's 'Luisa Miller'

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By **SCOTT CANTRELL / The Dallas Morning News**

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Dallas Opera veterans who sniff that the company no longer hires "star" singers – the Maria Callases and Jon Vickerses – will have to change their tune after the current production of Verdi's rarely performed *Luisa Miller*. Singing the title role, of a young woman tragically double-crossed in love, Ruth Ann Swenson supplies vocalism of a beauty and expressivity scarcely to be outdone anywhere.

Her soprano is effortlessly ample, its color and texture tellingly varied, phrases eloquently caressed. And she convincingly portrays a young woman who descends from girlish enthusiasm to dark tragedy.

As Federica, her rival for Rodolfo's love, mezzo Mzia Nioradze is another standout, a genuine diva with a big, blazing voice to match. Christine Abraham doesn't have much to do as the village girl Laura, but she sings radiantly.

If only the men were as good. At least in Friday's opening performance, at Fair Park Music Hall, they were too often rhythmically slack, lagging behind the orchestra. And too much of the singing wasn't dead in tune.

The three low voices are attractive and aptly contrasted. Raymond Aceto, the conniving Count Walter, has more brass to his bass; Gordon Hawkins, Luisa's father, Miller, has a thicker, more covered sound. Jeffrey Wells, chilling as Walter's sidekick Wurm, falls somewhere between.

Tenor Raúl Melo, a late replacement in the role of Rodolfo, sings the notes with a semblance of the right sound. But there's no poetry, and under pressure – which it too often is – the tone goes sharp.

Conducting as if he owns the score, music director Graeme Jenkins gets taut, dramatic playing from the orchestra, with especially elegant clarinet solos. New Yorkers who go on about the Met orchestra haven't heard the Dallas Opera orchestra on a good night, and this was certainly one. The