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Review: 'Tosca' enchants in Opera San Jose opener

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Lucca, Italy, a city that retains its Renaissance-era beauty, is strangely reminiscent of San Jose. Remarkably affluent, musically inclined, Lucca is overshadowed by Florence, 48 miles away, the precise distance between San Jose and the artistic mecca of San Francisco. But give a city time, plant the right seeds: Lucca is the birthplace of Giacomo Puccini.

Saturday evening at the California Theatre, Opera San Jose experienced a rebirth of the Italian master, opening its 32nd season with Puccini's "Tosca." The company has always made a point of providing a home for the next generation of gifted artists, and under new general director Larry Hancock, the emphasis on vocal talent is now more pronounced than ever.

On Saturday, the results were simply marvelous, reminding us that what communicates in art is neither the name nor the reputation of a city, but the devotions and meticulous means of a select few within it.

George Bernard Shaw calls Victorien Sardou's play "La Tosca" (1887) "an old-fashioned, shiftless, clumsily constructed, empty-headed turnip ghost of a cheap shocker." And Shaw is absolutely correct: The play is rarely, if ever,





PAT KIRK/OPERA SAN JOSE Opera San Jose resident tenor Kirk Dougherty shines as Cavaradossi, and guest soprano artist Olga Chernisheva was mostly terrific in the title role, in Opera San Jose's season-opening production of Puccini's Tosca. And baritone Matthew Hanscom (not pictured) was a standout. (KIRK)

Musetta (Merola Opera Program, 2002) encompassing but a fraction of her repertoire.

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performed or even mentioned.

As an opera, however, the story takes on dramatically satisfying proportions.

In her company debut as Floria Tosca, soprano Olga Chernisheva assumed one of Puccini's most challenging heroine roles. A natural singer with beautiful colors, Chernisheva has sung the wide spectrum of Puccini, with Mimi, Manon, Angelica, Liu and

For the most part, Chernisheva played the part of the capricious, quixotic tragic character to a tee. Problems arose, however, in the beloved aria "Vissi d'arte" ("I lived for art"), where as an actress, she was unable to find a convincing tone of solemnity, as exhibited gracefully by countless voices in the past. Chernisheva sings wonderfully, but was strangely uneven at times here, in matters of pitch and in cohesiveness with the orchestra.

However, Chernisheva sustained moments of beauty and clarity throughout the production, and her expressivity won the audience over more often than not. The former Bolshoi singing actress is a worthwhile study in verismo, communicating the excesses of passion and emotion, the quick contrasts of mood, with grace and conviction.

Opera has been called many things, but its ability to grace social issues anew remains wonderfully potent. The police in 1800 Rome don't target youths of a certain profile, but they torture and deceive, abusing citizens with their polluted ideas of justice and equity.

Chief of police Scarpia is Puccini's first formidable role given to a baritone, and this most interesting of creations was played by the star of the evening. Matthew Hanscom's

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depiction of Scarpia was simply a work of art. In a substantial role offering few moments of sustained cantabile, the former Merolini (2007) gave a commanding, transformative performance. His presence conveyed a masculine authority, frightening, even as he attempted to woo his love interest -- his character made inspiring and repulsive all at once. The flexibility of Hanscom's acting was something to admire and reflect on, as he reveled in the ruthless, and more nuanced, even tender qualities of the villain.

Tenor Kirk Dougherty shined as the doomed, hapless painter, Mario Cavaradossi. The unique timbre and expression of his handsome voice, coupled with refined, satisfying phrasing, provided noteworthy, heartfelt performances of "Recondita armonia" and "E lucevan le stelle," two of the treasured arias of the repertoire. The four beautiful solo cellos and their suspensions, which prepare the latter, were also well considered, just and emotionally felt.

The production as a whole was entertaining, titillating and, at moments, wonderfully heartwarming. Conductor Joseph Marcheso inspired confidence from the moment Scarpia's whole-tone motif entered, and the balance of his orchestra with the warm, lush singing of Puccini's melodies was particularly satisfying and moving throughout. Performances given by Brian James Myer, Carl King and Michael Boley were all well-mannered and deserving of praise. Set designer Steven Kemp illustrated the sites and shadows of Rome with subtle elegance and understanding.

In what is perhaps the most recent, widely experienced contemporary reference, the villain in the 2008 James Bond film "Quantum of Solace" offers a sly shrug during a performance of the opera: "Well, Tosca isn't for everyone." But on opening night in San Jose, the villainous and brilliantly played Scarpia aptly summarized the atmosphere created by the cast of this young, blossoming opera company: "Too lovely art thou, Tosca, and too enchanting to be resisted."

'tosca'

Opera San Jose presents Puccini's work When: 3 p.m. Sept. 20 and 27; 8 p.m. Sept. 17 and 25

Where: California Theatre, 345 S. First St., San Jose

Tickets: \$51-\$151; 408-437-4450,

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