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Review: Opera San Jose's delightful Puccini double-bill

By Richard Scheinin
rscheinin@mercurynews.com

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It's more than a quarter-century since Opera San Jose last staged Puccini's "Suor Angelica" and "Gianni Schicchi," one-act operas with magic carpet-ride scores and plots as directly communicative as O. Henry short stories. Well, folks, they're back, having opened over the weekend at the California Theatre in a new production that pops across the board, with crackerjack ensembles and charismatic stars.

It's a delight.

The two mini-operas comprise two thirds of Puccini's "Il trittico" ("The Triptych"), which also includes the one-act "Il Tabarro" ("The Cloak"). When this triple-decker premiered at the Metropolitan Opera in New York in 1918, the composer hoped future productions would keep it intact. That rarely

happens; combined with intermissions, the three operas would last a good four hours.

Staging two is a reasonable compromise.

At the California, "Suor Angelica" -- about an ill-fated nun, the eponymous "Sister Angelica" -- is the opener, tragic beyond words and yet somehow golden. (It stars plush-voiced soprano Cecelia Violetta López, who lived inside the demanding title role during Sunday's performance.)

Tragedy's antidote arrives after intermission with "Gianni Schicchi," an outrageous farce about a clan of greedy connivers who steal the inheritance of a dying man. (Gianni Schicchi, the brains behind the scheme, was wickedly portrayed by baritone Zachary Altman, who sang with burnished, gale-force glee.)

Stage director Lorna Haywood doesn't let the action flag; stately in

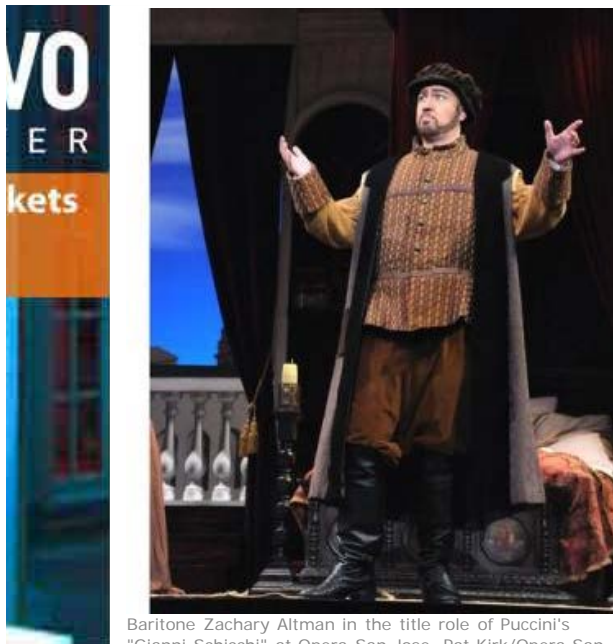
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Baritone Zachary Altman in the title role of Puccini's "Gianni Schicchi" at Opera San Jose. Pat Kirk/Opera San Jose. (Pat Kirk/Opera San Jose)

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"Suor Angelica," it moves with vaudevillean deftness in "Gianni Schicchi." Charlie Smith's handsome sets are adaptable: The immaculate white convent courtyard of 17th century Siena in "Angelica" becomes a richly colored and somewhat unkempt 13th-century Florentine flat in "Schicchi." And then there's the music: tuneful and opulent - streaming like tapestries through both operas, and expressively performed by the orchestra, under the baton of Joseph Marcheso.

"Suor Angelica," which finds Puccini under Debussy's spell, begins with bells and a calming "Ave Maria" chorus. And then, quickly, the story unfolds: Sister Angelica, who hails from an aristocratic family, has been sent to the convent after bearing a child out of wedlock. Now, seven years later, a mean-spirited aunt arrives -- the Princess, portrayed Sunday by Patrice Houston, an imposing and powerful mezzo. The aunt disinherits Angelica and delivers the news that her son is dead, sending the nun into a tailspin. López's depiction of this trapped soul's unraveling was poignant, achieved with arching, lyric song, matched by unsettling emotion.

Thank goodness for Gianni Schicchi, whose apparently true-life story was mentioned by Dante in "The Inferno" and adapted by librettist Giovacchino Forzano. In a nutshell: Buoso Donati, a Florentine

landowner and mill operator, has died, leaving his fortune to a nearby monastery. His outraged family calls in savvy Schicchi to subvert the will. He does, through fraud and impersonation, while the dead man's body keeps getting hustled on and off the stage. Schicchi also fleeces his co-conspirators; more than that, I won't tell you.

The music bustles, foreshadowing Gershwin. Some of its close vocal harmonies (i.e. the "Bedtime Trio") point toward Munchkinland in "The Wizard of Oz." Even amid the scheming, Puccini melts the listener, as in the famous aria "Oh! mio babbino caro," soulfully sung by López, as Lauretta, Schicchi's daughter. As Rinuccio, Lauretta's husband-to-be, tenor Alexander Boyer sang like a romantic, with big, round and pleasing sonorities. Bass Silas Elash was a powerhouse Simone, a dim-witted Donati

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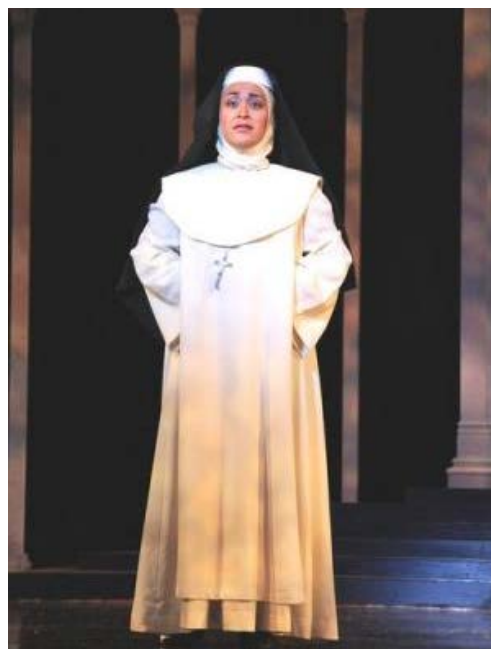
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patriarch. Truly, the 15 or so members of the cast were "in the zone," as they say. Outfitted in early Renaissance costumes, flanking Buoso Donati's deathbed, they looked as if they had leaped out of a vintage oil painting.

López's and Altman's deliveries thinned on occasion in low registers, and Marcheso might have tamped down the volume here and there, where the orchestra overwhelmed. Beyond that, this was a mighty pleasing production.



Soprano Cecilia Violetta Lopez as the title character in Puccini's "Suor Angelica." Pat Kirk/Opera San Jose. (Pat Kirk/Opera San Jose)

Contact Richard Scheinin at 408-920-5069, read him at www.mercurynews.com/richard-scheinin and follow him at [Twitter.com/richardscheinin](https://twitter.com/richardscheinin).

Opera San Jose

Presenting 'Suor Angelica' and 'Gianni Schicchi,'
by Giacomo Puccini

Through: April 28;
next performance,
8 p.m., April 18

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