

OPERAVILLE

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Opera San Jose: Puccini's Suor Angelica and Gianni Schicchi



April 14,
2013

The last two one-acts of Puccini's 1918 *Il Trittico* make an effective combination: a tragic opera about death, followed by an hilarious opera about death (a wound followed by a salve for the wound). This particular twosome also

gave stage director Lorna Haywood a chance to show some range: a tasteful, carefully choreographed *Angelica* (the black and white of the nuns operating almost as elements of a canvas), followed by the barely contained riot of *Schicchi*.

In the title role, Soprano Cecilia Violetta Lòpez continued to enchant, although in unexpected ways. "Senza mamma," Puccini's most brilliantly restrained aria, failed to give Lopez the liberty for the artful phrasing that so marked her masterful turn in *Il Trovatore*. (She would get that chance in Schicchi's "O mio babbino caro," performed so beautifully that the audience interrupted her before the final restatement.) In *Angelica*, it was more her acting -

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- ▼ [2013](#) (15)
 - ▼ [April](#) (4)
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 - ▶ [February](#) (3)
 - ▶ [January](#) (2)
- ▶ [2012](#) (24)
- ▶ [2011](#) (21)
- ▶ [2010](#) (14)
- ▶ [2009](#) (20)
- ▶ [2008](#) (23)

ABOUT ME



[MICHAEL J. VAUGHN](#)

Michael J. Vaughn is the author of thirteen novels, including the recently

especially a full-blown collapse at the news of her estranged son that would melt even the coldest heart. Her commitment to the emotion of the moment was just stunning. She preceded that moment with the thrilling vinegar tone of her warning to her aunt, The Princess, "Another moment of silence will damn you for eternity!"

Mezzo Patrice Houston spent the afternoon playing avaricious bitches, and it's hard to say which one was more enjoyable. In *Schicchi*, Zita is at least honest about her money-grubbing, so it's easy to get on board. In *Angelica*, the Princess is creepily heartless, resigned to getting her trampy niece to sign over her wordly possessions for the good of the family. Houston sings Puccini's flat lines with a meticulous diction, as if she has a lawyer offering prompts through an earphone. Her delivery of "Nel silenzio di quei raccoglimenti" was vastly compelling, a beautifully Catholic rationalization for torturing the living on behalf of the dead.

Soprano Elizabeth Russ was a delight as quirky Sister Genovieffa, notably in "Soavo Signor mio," a remembrance of her previous life as a shepherdess. The ensemble work was lovely, especially the various a capella passages that Puccini used to match the convent setting.

The idea of range also applied to Joseph Marcheso's orchestra, which excelled in the remarkably spare score of the first opera, featuring some lush string passages behind Angelica's arias and wonderfully provocative buzzing effects behind the Princess - then shifted easily to *Schicchi*, an old-fashioned buffa romp with a decidedly new-fashioned score. Of particular fascination is the dotted swoop of a central string motif that runs beneath the dialogues like a sonic carpet.

Schicchi may be the funniest opera ever written - remarkably, by the same librettist, Giovacchino Forzano, who wrote *Angelica*. Director Haywood and her ensemble leave no comic stone unturned. Two favorite moments were the search for the will, conducted by the careless flinging of most of the dead man's possessions onto the floor; and Schicchi's analysis of said will, during which the family members followed him around the room like the Pied Piper's rats.

Both operas depend heavily on their title characters, and baritone Zachary Altman delivered with elan, playing the

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part like the fox in a henhouse of dumb clucks. The eventual betrayal, as he lies in bed, impersonating the dead man himself, is a wicked joy.

The perpetual surprise of "O mio babbino caro" is the way that it pops right out of the dialogue. A new surprise was how funny it was when "Firenze è come," first introduced by Rinuccio as a tribute to Schicchi's guile, kept bursting forth every time the tides turned in the favor of Rinuccio and Laretta's May wedding. The song's overdone lyricism (Puccini asked that it be sung in the style of a Tuscan folk song) was elevated to glorious saccharine by Lòpez and Alexander Boyer, whose tenor was even more robust than usual.

Charlie Smith's set is graceful and versatile, full of small ornaments, a wall of narrow white archways around a stained-glass entry window that looks like it was fashioned from quartz. The walls converted handily to the interior of Buoso's apartment, the thick doors of the convent becoming the headboard of the deathbed.

Oh, and a little credit to Stephen Howes, who played Buoso. Playing a corpse may sound like easy work, but I don't know many people who could stay still that long.

Through April 28, California Theatre, 345 S. First St., San Jose. \$51-\$111, 408/437-4450, www.operasj.org

OSJ's 2013-14 season will include Verdi's *Falstaff* (Sept. 7-22), Humperdinck's *Hansel und Gretel* (Nov. 16-Dec. 1), Puccini's *Madama Butterfly* (Feb. 15-March 2) and Mozart's *Don Giovanni* (April 19-May 4).

Images: Baritone Zachary Altman as Gianni Schicchi. Photo by Pat Kirk.

Michael J. Vaughn is a 25-year opera critic and author of the novel *Operaville*, available at amazon.com.

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