

April 14, 2013

Opera San José's Take on Greed and Legacy Hunting

OPERA SAN JOSÉ

BY JOHN BENDER



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Opera San José's current pairing of Giacomo Puccini's *Suor Angelica* and *Gianni Schicchi* set the two in brilliant contrast, underlining spiritual salvation through tragedy in the one and economic prosperity through farcical trickery in the other.

Puccini conceived his triptych of contrasting one-act operas as an ensemble (*Il trittico*), but impresarios often pick and choose. San José's duo focused on the two works that reveal the complex texture of Italian life in earlier centuries — the convent as moral enforcer serving powerful aristocrats on the one hand and the intricate greed of a Florentine commercial family on the other.

This is the most cogent and moving *Suor Angelica* I have seen, even more than some with major stars. Cecilia Violetta López portrays the heroine, a gentle nun, forced into seclusion by her rigid aristocratic family after bearing an illegitimate child. López' beauty and youth lend conviction to the story, and her skills as a physical actress would gain notice on any stage. Her voice's warm timbre and soft tone are equally attractive. Yet her singing, which alternates between soft and loud, with little texture between, does not match the plangency of her presence.

Angelica's seven years of longing for news of her son are ruptured when her aunt, La Zia Principessa, descends on her to demand that the girl renounce her inheritance. Word that the boy is two-years dead breaks Angelica's will and leads her to despairing suicide, though Puccini plays God and grants a final vision of the child, with the blessing of the Virgin.

Puccini created a great role in the Principessa, a lavishly attired, jewel-encrusted matriarch whose heartlessness opens, though briefly, when she describes communion with Angelica's dead mother during prayers. In Sunday afternoon's performance, Patrice Houston truly inhabited her part, offering a richly varied vocal line that conveyed both domineering authority and, in that short recollection of prayer, a residue of humanity. Her bearing and her magnificent costume, by designer Elizabeth Poindexter, completed her memorable characterization.

The convent appeared, in Charlie Smith's design, as a 15th-century square cloister of very tall white marble arches, centered by large chapel doors. A holy water font guarded by a large Virgin Mary is showered in soft yellow light that casts shadows of leafy branches and, ultimately, as the chapel doors open to reveal the boy in halos of light and clouds, glows golden to ensure God's grace for Angelica.

For *Gianni Schicchi*, the tall arches, now transformed into windows, filled in with large religious paintings, or serving as niches for Renaissance decorative objects,



Soprano Cecilia Violetta López as Sister Angelica in *Suor Angelica*.
Photos by Pat Kirk.

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became the walls of a grand room, rich in palatial furnishings and centered on a huge curtained bed.

Director Lorna Haywood's poetic staging of *Suor Angelica* now found its opposite, as she moved the nine Florentine relatives of the rich, just dead, Buoso Donati about the stage in ever-changing groups, with amazingly varied and individual marks of character. She is a master of the low farce that defines this old-as-the-hills story of legacy hunting.

A frantic search of the room reveals Buoso's will and, with it, the truth that everything is going to a monastery. The young Rinuccio, who loves Lauretta, the daughter of the scorned but devilishly clever newcomer to Florence, Gianni Schicchi, fetches him to find how to break the will. The prestigious but broke family joins his scheme to impersonate Buoso as if he were still living, and to trick a notary and two witnesses into certifying a new will. Schicchi brings off his brilliant disguise, distributes good farms to everyone, but awards himself Buoso's house, his best mule, and a mill of great value. The outraged family must stand by, trembling in fear, because the fraud would be punished by loss of a hand and exile for every conspirator. The enriched Schicchi can now grant the dowry required for Rinuccio and Lauretta to marry.

The large ensemble cast really were the stars here, as their singing, prancing, cringing, grimacing, and gesturing virtually burst the stage with energy. Among them, Patrice Houston again stood out as Zita.

Alexander Boyer's tenor shaped nice, if at times too loud, phrases for Rinuccio. Cecilia Violetta López sang Lauretta's famous aria, "O mio babbino caro" (Oh, my dear papa), to pleasing effect and looked the right age for a 21-year-old. Zachary Altman used his soft, pleasant baritone to play Schicchi against the more usual exaggerated type — appearing to be more the modest and clever businessman than the trickster he really is.

The clear, present acoustic of the 1,100 seat California Theatre assisted conductor Joseph Marcheso as he marshaled his 40 players to grand effect, bringing out individual lines in Puccini's complex, colorful, and richly paved scores. Much of the credit for these propulsive, idiomatic, and emotionally engaging performances goes to him.

Note: The operas will be performed through April 28 with two alternating casts.

John Bender is professor of English and comparative literature at Stanford University. He has reviewed the San Francisco Opera for Opera Canada for several years.

Tenor James Callon as Rinuccio and mezzo-soprano Nicole Birkland as Zita with Opera San José chorus in *Gianni Schicchi*.

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