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## Opera San Jose — Rossini's "The Italian Girl in Algiers"

by Heather J. Morris

November 18, 2014



What fun. What laugh out loud fun! Opera San Jose's production of the seldom seen 'The Italian Girl in Algiers' is an amusing, whimsical portrayal of a man who bites off more than he can chew, a tiger of a man who, underneath all the testosterone driven bravado, is really a timid kitten.

The plot centers around Mustafa, the ruler of Algiers, who has become bored with his harem and decides he must have an Italian girl – a bizarre premise to begin with and one that stage director Michael Shell milks for all it's worth. Every opportunity for a comic gesture, every opera buffo moment, and especially Mustafa's ability to create crazy facial expressions, is taken and embroidered upon to produce a rollicking comedy. There's even that famous farcical device of moving trees.

Set in the sumptuous palace of the Bey the set design by Steven Kemp conjures up North African architecture and the costumes by John Lehmeyer range from bright, beautiful and sparkling for Isabella and her servant, Zulma, to downright funny for the wobbly padding of the eunuchs. There are lots of hilarious costume moments: Mustafa removes his clothes in a risqué move worthy of 'The Full Monty'! When Taddeo receives his new robes from Mustafa he is given an elaborate turban so heavy he nearly falls down with every step. Matthew Hanscom showed his versatility since his comedic role here is the antithesis of his title role in tragic Rigoletto. The audience was highly appreciative and broke into laughter many times and I wondered how the singers managed to keep singing at times – but they did. The final fall of the lecherous, over-confident Bey when confronted with a huge bowl of

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spaghetti was priceless.

It is refreshing to see a full house at classical music events, *but* unlike many opera companies around the country, Opera San Jose has never had a deficit. By the end of this, its 31<sup>st</sup> season, Opera San Jose will have presented 152 opera productions including five world premiers (Weiser's 'Where Angels Fear to Tread' will be Opera San Jose's February world premier) and their productions will have been presented to 35,000 people. That's impressive especially in times of recession. The feature that makes Opera San José unique in the United States is its resident company of principal artists. Outstanding operatic artists in the first years of their careers are identified and awarded annual contracts to perform leading roles in main stage productions and to participate in school and community-wide educational activities. These singers are groomed for international performing careers. In this production of 'The Italian Girl in Algiers' Michael Dailey, a former member of the resident company, returns as Lindoro, Isabella's true love and Silas Elash as Haly also returns this season. New resident members play lead roles: Nathan Stark as Mustafa, Nikola Printz as Zulma and Isabella Ivy, who charmed us with Gilda in 'Rigoletto', now plays Elvira, Mustafa's spurned wife. Mezzo-soprano Lisa Chavez as the title character shared center stage with Nathan Stark's Mustafa. Their interplay was fast paced and Stark proved that his characterization and comedic skills are on a par with his impressive voice. Chavez was convincing in her role too, and her voice was rich and expressive.

Composed when Rossini was only 21 years old, despite its charm and uproarious stage direction, this is a difficult opera to perform. The vocal roles are demanding. 'Is there such a thing as a coloratura bass?' I found myself wondering as I listened to Stark's vocal agility. Dailey's abundant vocal skills were apparent from his first aria, '*Languir per una bella*' which abounds in leaps, centering itself in its high range. The opening men's chorus seemed to be a bit worse for wear after their shipwreck, however, and not quite together. There were a couple of other places where the chorus, in its exuberance, got ahead of the orchestra and we saw conductor Ming Luke clinging for the life raft for a few unsettling measures. This production opened on November 14<sup>th</sup> which may account for a few teething problems in the extended overture with highly demanding solos for some of the woodwind instruments. The recitatives were accompanied splendidly on harpsichord though I could not find the player acknowledged in the program. The show runs until November 30<sup>th</sup>.

End

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