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Story

Opera San Jose's marvelous world premiere is a financial gamble but an artistic triumph

by Mort Levine, Milpitas Post Newspapers

POSTED: 02/11/2015 05:12:59 PM PST
| UPDATED: A DAY AGO

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The question is whether a superb opera written in our era can convince audiences, accustomed to the tried and true repertory of 100 or more years ago, to trust the instincts of a team of outstanding professionals that a new opera can really be a deeply moving experience. That hypothesis is being tested from last weekend through Sunday, Feb. 22.

It is the world premiere of a remarkable operatic achievement, the staging of "Where Angels Fear to Tread" from a deeply felt first novel by noted British writer E. M. Forster. Youthful composer USC's Mark Lanz Weiser wrote the music to a libretto by the savvy Roger Brunyate, an emeritus professor at the renowned Peabody Conservatory, a veteran opera in Britain.

Opera San Jose, now under the general direction of Larry Hancock, has mounted a stunning million-dollar production with an astonishingly balanced and talented cast of singers in partnership with the inspired musical direction of Joseph Marcheso, conducting the OSJ orchestra, which never played better.

This is the first fully-staged production of the work which was only aired in a workshop run-through at Baltimore's Peabody back in 1999. The composer was in his early 20s when the work began. But the fully accessible music, alternatively romantic and occasionally harshly dissonant sounds like it came from a seasoned veteran composer for the stage. Weiser has some shorter operas and many orchestral and choral works to his credit.

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The story's anti-hero is Gino Corella, a handsome 21-year-old who radiates a carefree, self-centered Italian sensuality. An English widow, Lilia Herriton, escaping from the stifling upper middle class victorian family of her late husband, falls in love with him. They marry hours before the family's envoys descend of the small (fictional) Italian hill town of Marteriano. It is based loosely on the real town of San

Gemignano noted for its ornate towers, cleverly reproduced for a variety of scenes indoors and out. Most of the subsequent action consists of the bumbling efforts of the stuffy Brits to separate the lovers and later when a child is born, similarly clumsy attempts to "buy" the child so it could have a proper British upbringing and ultimately the disastrous effort to kidnap the child leading to the infant boy's death in a carriage accident.

The opera is set about 1905 and is sung in English with a sprinkling of easily understood Italian phrases logical for a hotel catering to British tourists. There are excellent English supertitles over the proscenium although the singers' articulation is excellent. That was the era marked by the emergence of verismo, an operatic style, which brought real people and believable relationships coupled with the full range of melodically expressed emotions. Puccini and his contemporaries would have been proud to compose an opera like this with its humor, pathos, and grim horror where the music is so bonded to the words and the action.

In the cast we saw at the second performance on Sunday afternoon, Gino was sung for the first time by understudy Bryan James Myer. He was called up to replace an ailing Matthew Hanscom who sang the opener the night before. Myer's rich romantic baritone and agile acting proved a real winner. He deserves to sing at least another of the remaining three performances. Equally outstanding was soprano Christie Conover who performed the role of Caroline Abbott, a friend of the runaway Lilia. Caroline also falls for Gino but misjudges his love for the child in her effort to steal the child.

Lilia is sung by soprano Isabella Ivy, an OSJ resident artist. Other residents included Lisa

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Chavez singing the domineering, prejudiced sister-in-law, Harriet Herriton, who steals away the infant leading to its death, and tenor Kirk Dougherty, Harriet's submissive younger brother who breaks the news of the child's demise to Gino, enduring his rage and then in a scene that brought tears to many in the audience, clutch each other in grief.

Other important characters whose excellent voices joined in the duets, quartets and arias included mezzo Chloe Smart as Padrona, the operator of the hotel, Buffy Baggott as Perfetta, who helps out Gino with the baby and Jennie Litser, a coloratura soprano who filled the role of the star of a touring opera company. She sang from Lucia di Lammermoor, which the Brits attend. These arias were accompanied by a series of dissonant descants for a haunting effect. Along with dozens of trunks and suitcases, the opera singer brings along a small beagle dog appearing in two of the scenes in a non-singing role.

The score's many scene changes feature lushly orchestrated intermezzi, which combine to drive the story even without any words. These interludes were marked by some clever stage action contrived by the multi-talented director Lillian Groag. She previously directed one of Opera San Jose's best ever productions, Carlyle Floyd's "Of Mice and Men" done in 1997. Her acting experience helped the characters emphasize the drama.

Staging is by set designer Michael Ganeo who captured the essence of an Italian hill town, a modest tourist hotel. a church scene with stylized frescos and an overlook with a romantic vista. This was highlighted in a delightfully melodic quartet "Sunset on the Rocca." The use of a scrim with a simple map of Marteriano was a master stroke of staging. Costumes by Elizabeth Poindexter were elegant and appropriate. David Lee Cuthbert's lighting design, particularly in the storm scene with the fatal carriage accident, proved very effective.

Other vocal highlights included the second act duet between Caroline and Philip and Gino's aria of love for the infant. The effervescent singing of Gino and his three drinking buddies following the Lucia opera within the opera, reminded one of the frolicking artists and writers in "La Boheme's" first act.

The opera concludes with the somber departure back to England by Harriet, Caroline and Philip with only Philip, intrigued by the magical nature of Italy, who vows to return.

"Where Angels Fear to Tread" has remaining performances scheduled Sunday (Feb. 15 at 3 p.m.), Friday (Feb. 20 at 8 p.m.) and Sunday (Feb. 22 at 3 p.m.). All are in the California Theatre, 345 S. First St. in downtown San Jose. Tickets can be obtained from the Opera San Jose box office, at (408) 437-4450. They range from \$51 up to \$111, with discounts for students and seniors.

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Mort Levine is publisher emeritus of Milpitas Post Newspapers, which includes the Berryessa Sun.

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