

SECTIONS

Opera review: 'Angels' is a lush, neo-Romantic charmer

By [Joshua Kosman](#) Updated 3:24 pm, Monday, February 9, 2015

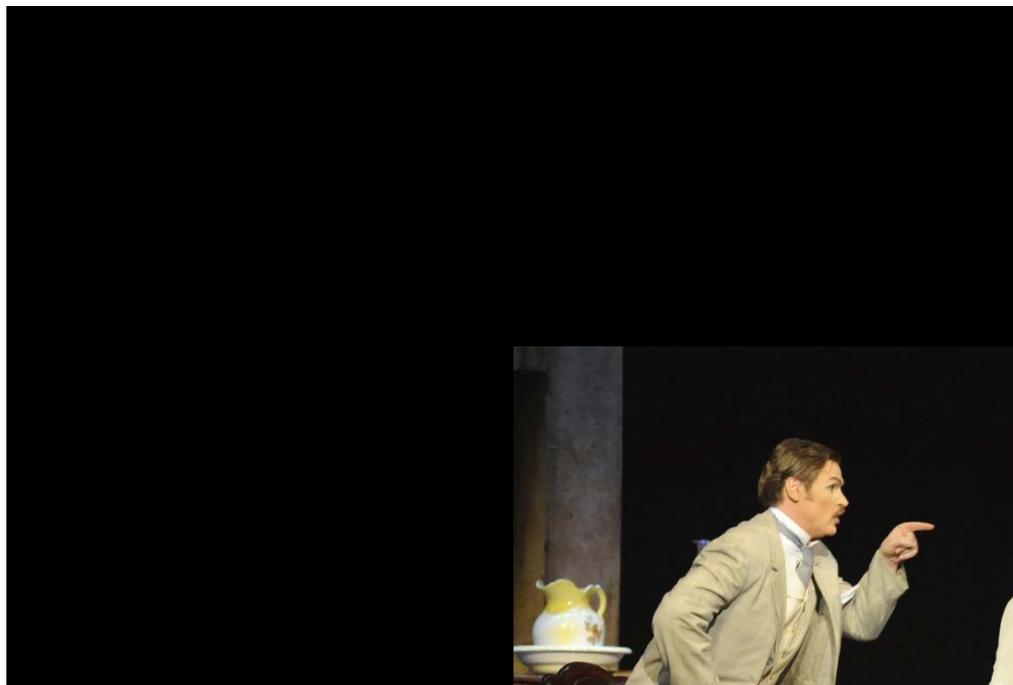


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Kirk Dougherty and Isabella Ivy are part of a large, talented cast in Opera San Jose's world premiere of Mark Lanz Weiser's "Where Angels Fear to Tread."

Among the various characters competing for space in E.M. Forster's slim first novel, "Where Angels Fear to Tread," the one nonhuman is Italy itself, whose charms are as seductive and elusive as anyone's. And how better to embody that appeal than in opera?

Midway through the second act of composer [Mark Lanz Weiser's](#) potent and well-made new work, which had a fine world premiere at Opera San Jose on Saturday night, a group of English tourists attends a performance of "[Lucia di Lammermoor](#)" in a small Tuscan village. We hear a few moments of Donizetti's familiar score, and begin to understand in a visceral way the effect of the Italian milieu on these buttoned-up Edwardian transplants.

Calling them "tourists," though, is wide of the mark. Philip Herriton, his imperious sister Harriet and the sensitive [Caroline](#)

Abbott are actually in town to get hold of a baby, the infant son of the Herritons' dead sister-in-law, who in their view needs to be rescued from his ill-bred Italian father.

The moral and emotional intricacies of that struggle are deftly conveyed in Weiser's neo-Romantic score, with help from Roger Brunyate's taut, canny libretto and a first-rate production at the **California Theatre**. If "Angels" doesn't often feel very innovative or surprising, its dramatic and musical workings are never less than cogent.

In a series of pertinent arias and ensembles buoyed by recognizable melodic motifs, Weiser and Brunyate evoke the key points of the drama. There's a surging, Puccini-esque orchestral prologue to set the scene (Brunyate has smartly excised the English scenes from the novel, keeping the action in the fictional hillside town of Monteriano), and a big vocal quartet to conjure up the beauty of the scenery.

The music for Gino, the Italian widowed father, evokes both his heedless vitality and the sympathy he engenders in the English characters in spite of their prejudices. Most poignant of all is Caroline, whose arias gleam with an arching lyricism that is straight out of **Richard Strauss**.

And the company has done a splendid job with the piece, giving it a production that reflects all the Italianate charm of the source material while keeping an aptly skeptical eye on the difficult moral undercurrents. **Michael Ganio's** set is spare but inviting, with just enough detail to bring the inn and the church settings to life, and director **Lillian Groag** gets expressive transparency from nearly all of the cast.

Saturday's performance, conducted with crisp dexterity by Music Director **Joseph Marcheso**, was as sensual and fluid as one could ask for, with lovely orchestral playing and attentive contributions from a large cast.

The finest performance came from soprano **Christie Conover** as Caroline, singing with melting directness and bringing worlds of nuance to the character's plight. Not far behind was mezzo-soprano **Lisa Chavez** as the unspeakable Harriet — her introductory aria, an unbridled torrent of xenophobia and wounded dignity, was a comic high point.

Tenor **Kirk Dougherty** as Philip and baritone **Matthew Hanscom** as Gino found less dramatic specificity in their assignments, though their singing was clear and strong. There were eloquent contributions too from **Buffy Baggott** as the housekeeper Perfetta, **Isabella Ivy** as the short-lived Lilia, and **Jennie Litster** as the Donizettian prima donna — as well as Baggott's talented dog Franny, whose vocal participation in the Act 1 finale came as a wondrous surprise.

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Where Angels Fear to Tread: Through Feb. 22. \$50-\$120. Opera San Jose, California Theatre, 135 W. San Carlos St., San Jose. (408) 437-4450. www.operasj.org.

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