

SJ Opera: Where Angels Fear to Tread

By [Cynthia Corral](#)

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Opera San José resident artists Chloe Smart as "Padrona, the innkeeper" and Lisa Chavez as "Harriet Herriton," guest artist Jennie Litster as "the Opera Singer," and Opera San José resident artist Kirk Dougherty as "Philip Herriton". Photo credit Pat Kirk

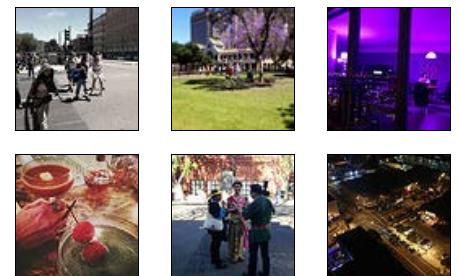
This weekend I attended the World Premiere of **Opera San Jose's *Where Angels Fear to Tread***, based on the novel by E.M. Forster, and I haven't really stopped thinking about it since. I was very excited to see a brand new opera. Good or bad it is great to occasionally see something new, and that is a pretty rare occasion with opera. I felt like it had a shaky start, and I had some issues with the story itself, but as an opera it was completely enjoyable and I would definitely go see it again – something I do not often say.

I have not read Forster's story, but the opera was quite an emotional roller coaster and I'm still not sure if this is considered a tragedy or comedy. It opens with Lilia, a young English widow, and her friend Caroline Abbot vacationing in Italy. Lilia's brother-in-law Phillip has rushed to see them because he has heard that Lilia has fallen in love with a young Italian, Gino, and not only that, but the young man is – hold on to your hats, folks – the son of a DENTIST. I know, it can't get much worse than that, right?? Well, this is apparently a horrific situation to the English, but Phillip is too late as Lilia has impetuously gone out and married the young man already. Several months later we see the marriage has not gone well, but Lilia is now pregnant, so once again it is too late. But then Lilia dies in childbirth and her English in-laws have decided there is no way they will let the child be brought up by those wretched Italians (especially the son of a dentist! *GASP*) so Phillip and his sister come back to Italy to try to convince Gino to give them his son. Caroline Abbott also wants to adopt the boy, and is upset that the



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English family is really only concerned about appearances.

But then another tragedy strikes, and it is so upsetting I thought the woman sitting next to me was going to collapse in a fit. She could not stop exclaiming and clutching her hands to her heart until the end of the opera, and I have to agree, it was shocking and truly tragic.

And yet there is a lot of comedy in this opera too, including an adorable dachshund who completely steals the show at the end of Act I. I have heard the dog was trained to howl on cue, but it appeared to the audience that he was barking for everyone to STOP THAT SINGING and Act I ended with the audience in hysterics. Later, almost immediately after the tragedy in Act III, Phillip gets his heart broken by the woman he loves, and it was a bit funny so we all laughed at him while also feeling weird for laughing so soon after the tragedy. The play ends with both Phillip and Gino deciding to live it up and be happy in Italy while the two women seem to sulk back to England, alone. How nice that the men, once again in opera, get to have the happy endings.



Guest artist Christie Conover as "Caroline Abbott".
Photo credit Pat Kirk.

The story may have given me some problems, but opera storylines often do with me. The opera itself however was spectacular. I was not too thrilled in the beginning, when I had troubles understanding the connections with the music, the libretto, and what was going on, but by the end of Act I I was all in, and from that point on the music and singing were simply amazing. **Jenny Litster** has a small part as the Opera Singer, but she was adorable and completely won over the audience (along with the amazing dachshund). Guest artist **Christie Conover** plays Caroline Abbott and did an outstanding job, and I hope we can see more of her in the future. But the winner of the night was **Brian James Myer**, who stepped into the role of Gino when Matthew Hanscom was unable to perform. Brian James Myer made the show. During intermission the audience could not stop talking about the song he sang to his baby. It was a moving performance and made the later tragedy that much more horrendous and upsetting. When he is given his tragic news later, he sobs into Caroline's lap in a scene that tore at our hearts. At the end he was given the loudest applause, and he

deserved it. Brian James Myer is a name to look for in the future.

Aside from the bumpy beginning, which may have been problematic for no one else but me, the Opera Novice, the rest of the opera was incredible. Conductor **Joseph Marcheso** did a masterful job leading the orchestra. I particularly loved a short piccolo (possibly flute) solo, and there are plenty of oboe parts which are always my favorite. This is the World Premiere, and I look forward to hearing the music in the future and seeing the opera again as well.

The stage was set beautifully in Italy, with several tall columns that were turned to create slightly different scenes: a hotel lobby, a sitting room, a dining room, etc. The lighting, especially in the opening scene, was simply breathtaking. The opera is in English with supertitles in English.

I may have issues with the story, but I have no problem recommending this opera or the music. I commend Opera San Jose for giving a new piece a chance and obviously putting a lot of time, effort, sweat and tears and money into this production. It was well worth it.

Where Angels Fear to Tread
Opera San Jose
Through February 22
California Theatre

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