



“Silent Night” in San José shows futility of war, yearning for peace

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From left, Ricardo Rivera as French Lt. Audebert, Matthew Hanscom as Scottish Lt. Gordon, and Kyle Albertson as German Lt. Horstmayer / Pat Kirk.

SAN JOSE, Calif. – The inspiring new opera *Silent Night* is presently receiving its West Coast premiere production by the modest-sized but valiant Opera San José. Written by composer Kevin Puts and librettist Mark

Campbell, the opera won the 2012 Pulitzer Prize, and deservedly so.

A film by the same name is widely known in the anti-war movement, and the opera recounts the same story: That miraculous day of peace on a bloody battlefield during World War I when Scottish, French and German soldiers warily crawled out of their trenches to negotiate an unofficial Christmas Eve ceasefire among themselves. The battle-exhausted soldiers, far from their generals and mourning their dead, are moved to come together to celebrate what will be for many of them their last Christmas once a carol begins floating softly from one enemy trench to another.

First performed in 2011 in St. Paul, Minn., *Silent Night* in San José is a new production, with sets, props, costumes, and projections created by the local company. Stage director Michael Shell says, "I think the opera's examination of the experiences the men had in the trenches of WWI poses questions of why we go to war, who benefits, and ultimately, the cost." The company is performing the work six times. Opening night on Feb. 11th received a warm standing ovation.

Campbell's two-act libretto uses English, French and German for the warring armies, as well as Italian for an operatic aria that figures into the story, and Latin for some of the Christmas prayers and songs. English supertitles keep the audience on track. Joseph Marcheso, Opera San José's music director and principal conductor, convincingly paces these complex forces.

The score contains no actual Christmas carols. Rather, Puts has created his own sound atmosphere that summons up the spirit of the season in the direst of times. The opera opens in a Berlin theatre on August 3, 1914, where tenor Nikolaus Sprink (Kirk Dougherty) and soprano Anna Sørensen (Julie Adams) are performing Puts' version of an 18th-century Italian aria about a couple reuniting after a war. An announcer interrupts their singing with the news that Germany is now at war. We also see two Scottish brothers, Jonathan Dale (Mason Gates) and William Dale (Branch Fields) and their priest, Father Palmer (Colin Ramsey), dragged from their daily pursuits into the conflagration; and Lt. Audebert (Ricardo Rivera), a French soon-to-be first-time father, whose own father is a French general (Nathan Stark), separated from his wife Madeleine (Ksenia Popova).

The stage is set for the brutal disruption of people's normal lives by an almost unnatural call to national and familial loyalty, and for the intense desire to resume the peace. No one at that moment imagined that this war, so unnecessary, so destructive and so futile, would endure four more very long years.

The rest of the opera takes place at the front, in the three trenches occupied by the French, Scottish and German

forces, and on the field between them, with a few brief scenes set in a commanding officer's chalet removed from the battle and back in headquarters, where the generals are driven to fury over the fraternizing with the enemy that has inexplicably erupted among the lower ranks.

A highly inventive new set design by Steven Kemp recreates the three trenches lined with sandbags in the form of large rectangular boxes that continuously move about the stage. Because we have at various points the French, German or Scottish trench center stage, from which we can cautiously peer out at the others, we are forced to consider the war as objectively as possible from the soldier's point of view irrespective of ideology or politics. There are displays of raw authority, as well as caring comradeship, on all sides.

Owing to the Christmas theme, these boxes can also be seen as cribs or creches cradling the hopes and innocence of young men cruelly conscripted to kill one another for no reason anyone could rationally explain. The promised glory of war soon becomes just so much pointless gore.

Who shot what archduke in some distant Balkan capital, how nations declared their loyalties, and what noble ideas they were fighting for, all remain in the background. The focus is on these finely drawn individuals caught without judgment in the vortex of events far beyond their control. The three company leaders, the Lieutenants Audebert, the Scottish Gordon (Matthew Hanscom) and German Horstmeyer (Kyle Albertson) are also principal characters, all at first resistant to the mood of the troops, but human enough eventually to see the need for a momentary truce and the opportunity to clear the field of their dead.

The opera opens with opera, and the role of the artist is regularly revisited throughout the course of the evening. How does music serve? To soothe, to inspire, to challenge, to resist? In his despair, Nikolaus Sprink remarks that opera and singing are “useless,” but Puts and Campbell clearly disagree. They saw nothing more important to do during the time it took to create *Silent Night* than offer this wise, though sad and sobering story to the world. When Sprink denounces the Hindenburgs and the Krupps of the world, it is no stretch to think Halliburton, General Electric, Dow, Boeing, *et cetera ad nauseam*.

Some might miss more female voices and characters, as there are only two, and Madeleine is a minor role. As Anna Sørensen, Julie Adams bears virtually all the responsibility for her sex, and Puts has written several extended scenes for her. One addresses that universal “knock on the door” when women receive news of their son, their husband or father. During that passage, a lone soldier appears on the battlefield and weeps when he finds his dead comrade's hat, a suggestion of same-sex love that is otherwise unspoken and unsung.

When Anna appears at the front to sing for the men on Christmas Eve, she seems like an angel from on high,

perhaps even a little Mary-like with her blue cloak. The opera centers around her love for Sprink: These two figures are the moral heroes of the piece, although it’s painful to have to say that. So many of the soldiers are simply decent, ordinary people ordered to behave against the grain of their own upbringing. If they cannot be heroic resisters against war, at the same time they cannot truly be held responsible either.

Father Palmer, who officiated at the improvised international Christmas service, will be sent home for disobedience, almost certainly to be defrocked by his bishop. So much for “peace on Earth.” At the end of his St. Francis-like prayer for spiritual guidance, he leaves his rosary behind in the mud.

A smaller but most poignant role of Audebert’s aide-de-camp Ponchel, who wishes he could be back home with his beloved mother just an hour away by foot, is movingly sung by Brian James Myer.

The Opera San José production of *Silent Night* includes costume designs by Melissa Torchia, battlefield lighting design by Pamila Z. Gray, and wigs and makeup by Christina Martin. The opera and this production are an artistic triumph. *Bravi tutti!*

Silent Night receives additional performances on Feb. 16 and 24 at 8 pm, and Feb. 19 and 26 at 3 pm, at the California Theatre, 345 South 1st St. (between San Carlos and San Salvador), San José.

To learn more about *Silent Night*, including ticket information, please visit operasj.org

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Eric A. Gordon is the author of a biography of radical American composer Marc Blitzstein, co-author of composer Earl Robinson’s autobiography, and the translator (from Portuguese) of a memoir by Brazilian author Hadasa Cytrynowicz.

He holds a doctorate in history from Tulane University. He chaired the Southern California chapter of the National Writers Union, Local 1981 UAW (AFL-CIO) for two terms and is director emeritus of The Workmen's Circle/Arbeter Ring Southern California District. In 2015 he produced “City of the



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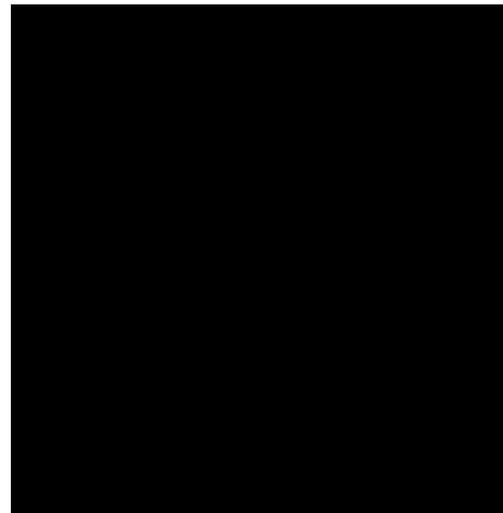
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