

# OPERAVILLE

MONDAY, FEBRUARY 13, 2017

## Opera San Jose's Silent Night



Ricardo Rivera as Audebert, Brian James Myer as Ponchel.

All photos by Pat Kirk.

Opera San Jose  
Puts and Campbell's *Silent Night*  
February 11, 2017

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### BLOG ARCHIVE

- ▼ 2017 (2)
  - ▼ February (1)
    - Opera San Jose's Silent Night
  - ▶ January (1)
- ▶ 2016 (13)
- ▶ 2015 (25)
- ▶ 2014 (271)
- ▶ 2013 (52)
- ▶ 2012 (24)
- ▶ 2011 (21)
- ▶ 2010 (14)
- ▶ 2009 (20)
- ▶ 2008 (23)

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### ABOUT ME



 MICHAEL J. VAUGHN

Michael J. Vaughn is the author of seventeen novels, including *The Popcorn Girl* and *Billy Saddle*. His poetry has appeared in more than 100 journals, and he works as a competitions judge for *Writer's Digest*. He lives in San Jose, and

One hears the story of the Christmas truce of 1914 so often that it's tempting to suspect a little mythologizing, perhaps wishful thinking. But no, the smallest bit of research reveals that not only did mortal enemies meet in No Man's Land to exchange tidings and small gifts that winter, it happened at dozens of points along the front. Working from the 2005 French film *Joyeux Noel*, librettist Mark Campbell and and composer Kevin Puts did a masterful job of distilling those stories into three squadrons – Scots, French and German – and creating a moving, personal account of that astounding night. For their effort, they won a 2012 Pulitzer Prize.

After arranging for the composer to create a custom score for its 47-person pit, Opera San Jose has put on perhaps its most ambitious project ever. The opening battle scenes are at once visceral and chaotic, a sort of combat ballet by fight director Kit Wilder, made all the more jarring by the archival projections from set designer Steven Kemp. Puts' swarming strings are like a Stravinskian film score, echoed later (in a lighter tone) in the cocktail-party chatter of the Christmas party.

plays drums for the San Francisco rock band Exit Wonderland.

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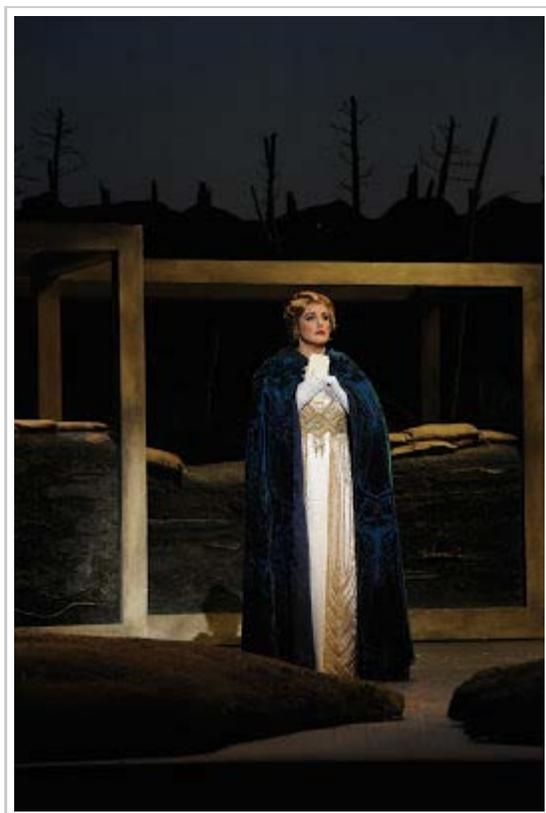
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Ricardo Rivera as Audebert, Matthew Hanscom as Lt. Gordon, Kyle Albertson as Lt. Hortsmayer.

Post-battle, the opera's ambition is to make things personal, and they start at a very primal place: sleep. Playing French lieutenant Audebert, baritone Ricardo Rivera displays a natural ability to project world-weariness, and a compassion for his men that is, at times, detrimental to his military assignments. He sings of a desire for a good night's sleep, in a passage that teases at lyricism (modern-opera listeners are always a little thirsty for melody), then suddenly opens up to a lush chorus from every single man on the darkened battlefield. This attempt to sing themselves to sleep, along with their words ("Maybe when I wake, all will have changed"), provides a hint at the upcoming unity of enemies. (Chorus director Andrew Whitfield.)

The stories then turn personal. Baritone Brian James Myer brings a little light to the scene as an upbeat French barber, Ponchel, singing of his home, an hour's walk from the battlefield, where he longs to go and have coffee with his mother. Tenor Mason Gates plays Jonathan, a Scots soldier whose brother's death leads him into a downward spiral of denial and vengeance. His eventual insanity leaves him as the only "effective" soldier left. Bass-baritone Kyle Albertson plays German Lt. Horstmayer, driven to be fierce and flawless to make up for his unfortunate Jewishness.



Julie Adams as Anna Sorenson.

The moral driver is (conveniently enough), an opera singer. Kirk Dougherty plays divo-soldier Nikolaus Sprink, singing his spinto protests against a terrible, pointless war with the kind of artistic passion that drives military folks crazy ("Artists make bad soldiers," says his lieutenant). Preparing for a command performance before the Kronprinz with his singing partner/lover Anna, he refers to "all

these fat old men, swigging their champagne," the true beneficiaries of the bloodshed. Anna manages to talk him into taking her to the front for Christmas eve, and thus are the seeds planted for a rebellious truce. The Germans have Christmas trees, the French have chocolate, the Scots have whiskey. And the tenor arrives with an actual angel.

Many of those dozens of Christmas truces were initiated through music, bits of carols and folks songs drifting across No Man's Land. Puts begins with the bagpipes (played by Lettie Smith), duly matched by harmonica (Isaiah Musik-Ayala), German songs, and Latin hymns, as Ponchel provides a running commentary. Puts' setting is fully natural, and allows the opening for Sprink to step bravely onto the battlefield and propose a Christmas peace.

The truce is everything you might imagine, a few tense, darkly humorous moments (Ponchel almost gunned down for drawing a chocolate bar from his pocket), and a great sense of relief at the removal of danger. Followed by a religious gathering (bass-baritone Colin Ramsey as the Scots' Father Palmer) and a soprano benediction. Julie Adams, an Adler Fellow set to play Mimi in San Francisco Opera's upcoming *La Bohème*, is quite the find, a dramatic soprano who can nonetheless play lyric, drawing heartbreaking pianissimos from the top of the range. Her Anna gives the production a female moral presence very much on everyone's minds (given recent marches and such).

This production also demonstrates OSJ's ability to throw some impressive male firepower at a challenging project. One of the company's most-acclaimed alums, tenor Christopher Bengochea, appears as the Kronprinz for fairly brief scenes, but lends the role a valuable authority. Baritone Matthew Hanscom as the garrulous Scot Lieutenant Gordon, bass Kirk Eichelberger as the German Officer, bass Nathan Stark as the fierce French General – all of them have played and will play leads in other productions.



Mason Gates as Jonathan Dale.

To their credit, Puts and Campbell don't leave it at that glorious Christmas. They proceed to the unsettling ramifications: the burying of the dead, the ludicrous thought of having to shoot at people they now know, angry superiors upbraiding underlings for treating enemy soldiers as if they were human beings. (Which brings up another recent topic: demonization.) A particularly moving scene leaves Father Palmer singing the hymn of Saint Francis as the impending return of violence plays beneath him in dissonant waves of strings. Nothing about this opera is easy, and that is wholly appropriate. It will leave you thinking a *lot* about the violence we do in the name of other-ness.

And the pivotal role of The War to End All Wars in introducing the bloodiest century ever.

Kemp's rollaway bunkers allow a filmic continuity, providing quick shifts from one faction to another. Joseph Marcheso forgot to bring his score to the podium (a good laugh for the audience), but proceeded to do a magnificent job of coordinating a small army of musicians. Some of the work's success comes from modern opera's supertitle culture, which provides an audience ready-made to take in a story sung in Italian, French, English, German and Latin. The presence of xylophone and piano in the first act give the sense of approaching magic (also the occasional snowfall). The horn passages on Christmas eve mornings are sumptuous. I also enjoyed the device of lining up several characters to deliver a fugue of information: soldiers' concerns, leaders' complaints, and especially soldiers reading descriptions of the magical truce from their letters.

Through February 26, California Theatre, 345 S. First Street, San Jose. operasj.org, 408/437-4450.

Operaville was recently named the eighth-best opera blog/website in the world by Feedspot.com. Michael J. Vaughn is a thirty-year opera critic and the author of 19 novels, including [Operaville](#) and [Gabriella's Voice](#). (Photo by Janine Watson.)



POSTED BY MICHAEL J. VAUGHN AT 11:42 AM

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#### 1 COMMENT:

[Michael J. Vaughn](#) said...

PS Inside sources inform me that the score is usually placed on



the podium by someone other than the conductor, so it may not have been Mr. Marcheso's fault.

FEBRUARY 13, 2017 AT 1:26 PM

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