



## Peace during wartime in SJ Opera's 'Silent Night'

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Around Christmas of 1914, as the intractable brutality of World War I began to register fully, a spate of truces broke out spontaneously all along the Western Front. German, British and French troops temporarily laid down their arms and celebrated the holidays with the men in the other trenches — singing carols, exchanging gifts and playing football in no-man's-land.

Once the holiday was over, they went back to murdering one another.

This unsettling and much-noted episode is the basis for "Silent Night," the affecting 2011 opera by composer Kevin Puts and librettist Mark Campbell that opened in a fine production at Opera San Jose on Saturday, Feb. 11. If the piece doesn't quite illuminate the psychology behind the Christmas truces — a task that may after all be better left to sociologists or clinicians — it does bring the story to life in a way that feels vivid and immediate.

It helps that Puts' two-act score, which won the Pulitzer Prize for music, moves with such assurance across a range of modes and stylistic references. There are songs and operatic pastiches, soliloquies and densely blended choruses, all cannily designed to serve the scenario.

And that scenario, in turn, is constructed with a deft eye to avoiding the potential pitfalls of the subject matter. "Silent Night" turns on three groups of military men — Scottish, French and German platoons deployed in close proximity to one another — and the evenhandedness with which the spotlight moves among them is as rigorous as a game of rock-paper-scissors.

Yet Puts and Campbell avoid any sense of blockiness by giving each faction a distinct

tone in both the drawing of the characters and their musical depictions. The Scottish forces, who tend to sing in austere, bracing melodic lines, are led by a thoughtful, hearty lieutenant (baritone Matthew Hanscom), and include an ardent young recruit (tenor Mason Gates) eager to avenge the wartime death of his brother.

Among the French forces are the brooding, romantic Lt. Audebert (baritone Ricardo Rivera) and his impish and ingratiating orderly, who somehow seems to get all the best lines (though that may have been an illusion fostered by the beautiful, clear-toned singing of baritone Brian James Myer).

The German division, meanwhile, is home to the greatest portion of dramatic nuance. It's led by a Jewish lieutenant (the robust bass-baritone Kyle Albertson) with a French wife, whose misguided loyalty to the German fatherland is not the opera's only case of ironic foreshadowing.

Also among the Germans are an opera singer (tenor Kirk Dougherty) and his lover and stage partner (the radiant soprano Julie Adams), both of whom have some pertinent thoughts on the role of art during wartime.

The most ingenious aspect of "Silent Night" is the way these three cohorts are established through both musical and linguistic means (the libretto is divided among English, French and German stretches), and then melded as the battlefield truce takes hold. To hear the various melodic styles blend into full-on choruses, and to hear linguistic barriers in the libretto break down as officers translate for one another or make halting attempts in unfamiliar languages, is a deeply moving business.

The San Jose production gives the work its due. Director Michael Shell makes deft use of the crowded stage at the California Theater to delineate the boundaries of the trenches and the way the soldiers manage to breach them, and Steven Kemp's set and projection design, abetted by Pamila Z. Gray's aptly murky lighting, conjure up the battlefield with chilling immediacy. On opening night, conductor Joseph Marcheso drew brisk and atmospheric playing from the orchestra.

Opera San Jose, which takes seriously its role as an incubator for young artists, tends to concentrate largely on the works of the standard repertoire for understandable reasons. But the company's occasional forays into more contemporary fare almost always seem to pay off, and this arresting production is no exception.

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**Silent Night:** Through Feb. 26. \$55-\$175. California Theatre, 345 S. First St., San Jose. (408) 437-4450. [www.operasj.org](http://www.operasj.org)



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