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The three field commanders: Ricardo Rivera, Mathew Hanscom, Kyle Albertson. All photos by Pat Kirk.

A fragile peace

Self-proclaimed patriots promote battle as the greatest glory, but in truth, it is a brutal activity in which young men of competing tribes senselessly kill one another. In *Silent Night*, this point is driven home when the German field commander proudly asserts that they are fighting for the Fatherland, read: the German people. His subordinate replies with disdain that they're not fighting for the Fatherland, but only for the benefit of Krupps and Bismarcks, i.e., industrialists and politicians.

But despite the external irrationality of war, there is a code of conduct, or an internal rationality. *Silent Night* deals with a true story in which the basic rules of war were broken. Units of warring countries in World War I agreed to lay down arms for a Christmas ceasefire to share food and drink, play soccer, and share stories about their families back home. As one of the commanders noted, "the war will not be settled on this day," a comment on the carnage and futility yet to come in "The Great War."

Though the opera premiered in 2011 (and won the Pulitzer Prize in 2012), Composer Kevin Puts has created a stirring musical score that is a throwback to more mellifluous times. True, there are strong dissonances throughout reflecting the chaos of battle, and excellent use of musical onomatopoeia in



The Scots Platoon.

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representing the sounds of munitions. However, to distinguish scenes of the different armies – French, British (specifically, Scots), and German – Puts adapts from musical idioms of those countries. The music could easily fit in a catalogue of operas from a century before.

Librettist Mark Campbell also succeeds in a great challenge, crafting a libretto not only in the languages of the three fighting units, but adding Latin and Italian. In the prologue, we meet the field commanders in their homelands as they are mobilized after the declaration of war, each with their own back story. These vignettes in their respective languages are followed by a rich multilingual ensemble of principals sharing their thoughts backed by choruses of patriotic soldiers supporting their cause.

Given the limitations of stage size, director Michael Shell does a fine job in suggesting the battlefield, a darkened world populated with piled sandbags, trenches, and denuded trees. Having to squeeze three battle units on stage simultaneously is the biggest problem, but in a sense, the closeness of these common men across different societies is suggested.

July 2015 (1)



Lt. Horstmayer dresses down Sprink as Anna looks on. Julie Adams, Kyle Albertson, Kirk Dougherty.

Indeed, it was common in trench wars to hear the enemy during lulls, and in this telling, German soldiers complain that they hear an alarm clock from the French lines every morning at 10:00, which they find alarming. During the ceasefire, they learn that a soldier innocuously sets the alarm to remind him that he had coffee at home with his mother every morning at 10.

The script is full of episodes that personalize men who are forced to look and act alike in the military. A Scotsman's is killed in battle, but his brother who is also in the unit and feels guilt for the loss is unable to admit it in his letters home. The French commander Lt. Audebert is expecting to become a father and hopes to receive word to confirm the birth. In sad contrast, given tragic events of the next war, the German commander Lt. Horstmayer, who is Jewish, wryly notes that this will be the first Christmas that he's celebrated. It could also be his last holiday season.

Vocalization is dominated by deeper male voices, but one subplot involves a German soldier, Sprink, who is a noted operatic tenor. He is called away from the front line one night to perform for the crown prince with a soprano, Anna, who happens to be his lover. After their performance, she expects him to spend the night with her, but he insists on returning to the front, as his courage has been questioned by his commander. In another breach of code, she joins him. This facilitates one of the beautiful passages in the score in which she sings a *capella* prayer for peace.

Singing is strong throughout the production. Julie Adams excels as Anna in the mid and upper ranges, though she loses power a bit in the lower end. Kirk Dougherty is also strong as Sprink, with the exception of some minor muffled parts. The three commanders give good account of themselves – Kyle Albertson as the gruff German, Matthew Hanscom as the voluble Scots, and Ricardo Rivera as the reflective French.

This is an opera that satisfies for its well crafted score and libretto, and this production provides emotional punch and quality elements. Conductor Joseph Marcheso guides the orchestra through the many idioms with confidence, and the stage artistry is notable in both singing and acting dimensions.

Silent Night, an opera composed by Kevin Puts with libretto by Mark Campbell, is produced by Opera San Jose and plays at the California Theater, 345 South 1st Street, San Jose, through



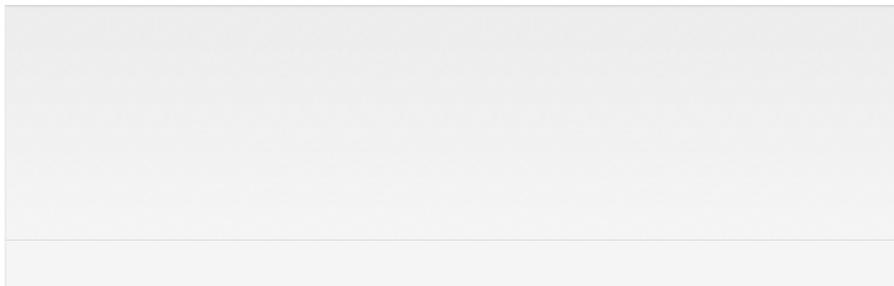
Sprink and Anna in lovers' duet. Kirk Dougherty, Julie Adams.

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