

Elina Garanča, Mezzo-Soprano | 3/19
Kevin Murphy, Piano

Elina Garanča



CARNEGIE HALL

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PARTERE

all right on the western front

by [John Masko](#) | 2:34 pm | Feb 28, 2017



Kevin Puts' *Silent Night* is an anomaly for high-level "classical music" in our times: its style is listenable and unpretentious, its emotionalism unfettered and raw. The opera, which had its west coast premiere of this opera in San José on Sunday, is in a sense a giant middle finger raised against the conventional wisdom that musical sophistication requires inscrutability. (In fact, this opera was an ideal antidote to my [unsettling](#) Friday, when I heard **Ted Hearne's** *The Source* in San Francisco.)

cher public



Portia Minty
I second John's

enthusiasm for this well-thought-out, interesting production with some wonderful singing. It would be great if this rebroadcast...

Start the revolution with me

51 minutes ago



Marcello

She is still around, singing Marcellina and Marthe.

Beyond the sea

2 hours ago



chicagoing

This is pretty amazing when you consider that a comparable commercial or PSA in the United States would almost certainly feature a star of the NBA...

Lait préludes

2 hours ago



Armerjacquino

This fits with my 'if it's Nikiteanu, it's Zurich' theory.

Beyond the sea

3 hours ago



ines

I saw him in this Idomeneo. His curls were all the way down to the shoulders, and he was pretty placid...(as was the production)- sang well...

Beyond the sea

3 hours ago



John Yohalem

A fabulous production of *Semiramide*! Slam-bang rootin-tootin politically involved THEATER, with a terrific sing of Rossini's finest...

Start the revolution with me

4 hours ago



Puts' first opera, commissioned and premiered in 2011 by the Minnesota Opera, won a well-deserved Pulitzer Prize for its epic scope and sumptuous neoromantic score. Set in three different languages (English, French, and German), *Silent Night* follows the story of members of Scottish, French, and German units who are brought together along World War I's Western Front in the winter of 1914. At the center of the opera's complex web of personalities are a married couple of German opera singers—Nikolaus Sprink (who is conscripted into the German army) and his wife, Ana Sorensen.

After Ana insists upon joining Nikolaus on the front line, the two claim asylum as French prisoners in order to avoid being separated. In the opera's telling, it is Nikolaus' risk-taking and trust in the fundamental humanity of those hidden in the trenches opposite him which starts the chain of events leading to the Christmas Truce, the centerpiece of *Silent Night*.

Puts' musical language is most at home in the cinematic, but borrows frequently from other sources depending on the circumstance. These influences run the gamut from late German romanticism to French impressionism (the opera features a full *Daphnis and Chloe* daybreak) to early twentieth century objectivism. (I was momentarily convinced, in a poignant scene where the three sides agree to extend the truce to recover the bodies of the dead, that I was hearing a snippet of Stravinsky's *Symphonies of Winds*.)

This is not even to mention Puts' use of several musical "plays with a play"—whether a Viennese waltz when Nikolaus and Ana are brought to perform for the German crown prince, or a Scottish folk song that the soldiers sing, in turns, on Christmas Eve.

As is the case in many great productions, the musical success of San Jose's *Silent Night* began in the orchestra pit with the finely-calibrated leadership of Assistant Conductor **Robert Mollicone**. A truly "cinematic" score—replete with that genre's abrupt shifts in style and affect—requires vigorous musical direction. Mollicone's supple gesture coaxed a varied palate of colors from the orchestra, and achieved a fullness in the string sound that would have been respectable for an ensemble fifty percent larger.

Though there were certain moments that reminded me that I was outside a musical mecca (a botched cello solo at the very opening of the second half chief among them), these were



Doris Lang Kosloff

For those of you who are still reeling from the revelation of hearing Nelson Martinez for the first time- he is the present day great Verdi and...

Broadcast: *La Traviata*

4 hours ago



DonCarloFanatic

Encouraged by your review, Porgy, I went to see the HD repeat last night. It's such a different experience than live in the Met. Super close-ups...

Water, logged

4 hours ago

[+ comments feed](#)

few and far between. Whether in Puts' piccolo and E-flat clarinet-heavy invocations of Shostakovich's military grotesquerie or the hushed string and harp passages as Lt. Horstmayer (**Kyle Albertson**) took account of the dead in the first scene, Mollicone's orchestra rose beautifully to Puts' challenge.

This production's high level of vocal performance was surprising for a regional opera company and suggested, along with the lavish staging and large ensemble, that this was a go-for-broke production for San Jose.

Particular standout performers were **Julie Adams** as Sorensen and **Mason Gates** as Jonathan Dale.

Adams, a former SF Opera Adler Fellow who will be returning to SF to play Mimi in *La Bohème* this summer, wholeheartedly embraced the intimidating task of playing the opera's only substantial female role. As Sorensen, she was exceptionally luxurious in the upper range, by turns feather-light and coquettish, and then dark and foreboding. In a particularly tender scene in which she lamented Nikolaus' decision to leave her behind at the Crown Prince's residence and return to his comrades, she was broken and vulnerable.

But when the Scottish soldier (and priest) Father Palmer (**Colin Ramsey**) says Mass during the truce, Puts has Ana sing parts of the mass text, transforming her character from grieving wartime wife to an angelic watchful presence as the men pray. Adams made this transition effortlessly, floating serenely above the strings and maintaining purposeful phrasing even at very soft volume.

Adams' musicality was also contagious in ensemble singing, bringing the best out of her husband Nikolaus (**Kirk Dougherty**) who, on his own, did not always seem to fill out his big-hearted, big-voiced role. As an actor, however, he showed a wide emotional range and skillfully embodied a character torn between love and duty to his comrades.



Less expected than Adams' mastery was the winning tenor performance of **Mason Gates** in the role of Jonathan Dale, a young Scotsman who is persuaded by his elder brother,

topics

- anna anna anna
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William, to enlist on the eve of the war's outbreak. William's early battle death lends Jonathan's character a solemn sense of purpose that he carries with him throughout the opera. Gates was able to vocally capture both sides of his mercurial character: as the sensitive younger brother, he brought a soft edge and resonant upper-range; and as the vengeful next of kin, his tone shifted to the steely and unforgiving. In a show full of solid performances, Gates was the male standout.

Baritone **Brian James Myer** turned in a charming performance as Ponchel, a young French barber who, near the close of the opera, was accidentally shot to death by a Scot as he tried on a German uniform. Though his somewhat overly enunciated French diction sounded less than natural, his tone made up for it. In an acting-heavy role, he brought much-needed comic relief and a sense of sentimentality that imbued both his singing and stage presence with palpable warmth.

In an opera that frequently flirts with kitsch but, with solid acting, doesn't surrender to it, Myer crafted a beautiful and tasteful moment discussing his village in France while cutting the hair of his superior, Lt. Audebert (**Ricardo Rivera**).

In the role of the gruff but deeply-conflicted Jewish German officer, Lt. Horstmayer, bass-baritone **Kyle Albertson** portrayed his character's complexity with aplomb. His subtle approach made his evolving feelings about Nikolaus fascinating to track. In one particularly affecting moment, Nikolaus defied Horstmayer's accusations of insubordination by reminding his commander of the fact that he, as a Jew, was wasting his time fighting for a country that would not fight for him. The thinly-veiled vulnerability of Horstmayer's explosive response was expertly pulled off.

Good acting was a general theme throughout this production. Stage Director **Michael Shell**'s brilliant coaching shone most brightly in the beginning of the truce scene that concluded Act I, as the men emerged tentatively from their trenches, not knowing whether they were about to be wished a merry Christmas or run through with a bayonet. In one of these moments, once all the men had exited the trenches and had begun to strike up nervous conversations, a French soldier reached a hand into his bag.

Fearing an imminent ambush, the surrounding Germans trained their guns on him, whereupon the Frenchman pulled a chocolate bar out of the bag and offered it to the German—"Chocolat?" As a moment of comic relief it was perfectly executed, the entire hall—audience and stage alike—answered with good-natured laughter.

There were momentary imperfections in the acting—particularly when it came to communicating in German or French. In the prologue, for instance, Nikolaus was informed by messenger that war had been declared, and only showed an adverse response after finishing the letter, not at the mention of the word "Krieg" (which is when the shock would have set in for a true German speaker). But overall the staging for this opera was carefully planned and lovingly carried out.

Steven Kemp's set design made maximal use of the fairly small stage space at the California Theatre. The trenches were set on a rotating base, so that when the opera focused on one or another army's trench, the stage could be rotated to bring that trench to center stage. Moving platforms were also used in battle scenes to create the impression that the soldiers were stealthily advancing toward the audience. The pieces were readily

movable to make room for the few scenes that took place away from the Front, including Nikolaus and Ana's evening performance for the Crown Prince.

The evening, minor blemishes aside, showed Puts' somewhat melodramatic but warm and deeply felt score at its best. Mollicone and Shell's skill at highlighting the opera's lighter and comic elements created a sincere camaraderie between audience and the cast on stage, furthering the opera's message of common humanity and the importance of finding levity even in the darkest of times.

San José is to be commended for successfully producing this very large show in a modest space. It is exciting to think of the impact it might have in a larger theater with an expanded budget for set and casting—perhaps San Francisco's War Memorial would fit the bill!

Photos by Pat Kirk.

Tags: [review](#), [san jose opera](#)

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3 comments

- *Rosina Leckermaul*

I saw SILENT NIGHT performed by the Atlanta Opera last Fall. It is a beautiful work. Unlike many contemporary composers of opera, Puts knows opera is about singing, but he also is a master of rich orchestrations. It warrants its success.

- *Mark Campbell*

Dear Mr. Masko:

Is there a reason that you omit the name of the librettist in this very lovely review? I am sure that Kevin Puts would readily acknowledge my role in the creation of the opera, which includes the MANY moments you seem to have enjoyed in the opera, including the humorous touches. I'd love to talk with you more about the librettist's role--it's a lot more important than you think.

Thank you,

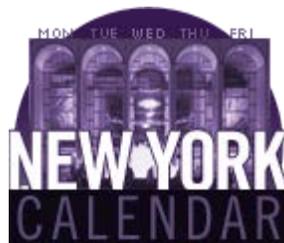
Mark Campbell

Librettist for Silent Night

<http://www.markcampbellwords.com>

- *Porgy Amor*

Sounds great, John. Thanks for another evocative and well-written account.



today's events

Aging Magician
11:00 AM

Rusalka
7:30 PM

upcoming events

March 3, 2017

Aging Magician
11:00 AM

The Grand Duke
7:30 PM

Utopia Opera

Roméo et Juliette
8:00 PM

[see full calendar→](#)

broadcasts

March 4 at 1:00 PM
Werther

March 6 at 7:25 PM:
Idomeneo

March 11 at 1:00 PM
La Traviata

March 16 at 7:25 PM:
Fidelio

March 18 at 1:00 PM
Guillaume Tell

March 21 at 7:25 PM:
Idomeneo

March 25 at 1:00 PM:

Idomeneo

March 30 at 7:25 PM:

Eugene Onegin

April 1 at 1:00 PM:

Fidelio

April 6 at 7:25 PM:

Aida

April 8 at 1:00 PM:

Tristan und Isolde

April 13 at 6:55 PM:

Der Rosenkavalier

April 15 at 12:30 PM:

Aida

April 18 at 7:25 PM:

Eugene Onegin

April 22 at 1:00 PM:

Eugene Onegin

April 25 at 7:25 PM:

Der Fliegende Holländer

April 29 at 1:00 PM:

Der Fliegende Holländer

May 2 at 7:25 PM:

Cyrano de Bergerac

May 6 at 12:30 PM:

Cyrano de Bergerac

May 9 at 6:55 PM:

Der Rosenkavalier

May 13 at 12:30 PM:

Der Rosenkavalier

Times ET.

dawn fatale on the met

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 - 3 [What is to be done?](#)
 - 4 [A little list](#)
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