



# ‘MOBY DICK’ A HIT DESPITE ABSENT WHALE

📅 February 11, 2019 👤 Paul Hertelendy

SAN JOSE—A very good American opera becomes a great experience through a highly theatrical production currently at Opera San Jose.

This is Jake Heggie’s “Moby Dick” (2010) in a super-charged dramatic

concept, thanks to both Kristine McIntyre stage director and Gene Scheer, who wrote the visionary libretto. McIntyre, a master of the art, should be giving boundless master classes to conservatories full of budding directors, even those in major prestige opera houses hard pressed to provide her sort of animation.

Melville's epic seafaring novel has hit the California Theater's stage like a meteor, impacting despite a virtually all-male cast, and no waters in view at all. The OSJ voices are robust up and down the line, bursting the rafters of the theater (without electronic enhancement). The chorus of rough-and-tumble sailors lunges, bounces and whips around the stage vehemently in storm scenes, with some of the most elaborate choral movement cues ever. And their exuberance crosses the footlights again and again like repeat tsunamis.

Yes, there are similarities to bigger-than-life dramas like Wagner's "The Flying Dutchman." Captain Ahab's obsessions to capture the great white whale Moby Dick—who, in colossal attacks of gargantuan underwater stage fright, never actually appears— may not be realism at all; as in Orpheus or Icarus, it's a parable of a hero obsessed with reaching the unattainable goal. When he attains it, he is destroyed in the process.

Powerful projection marked the voices of the colorful and contrasting seafarers such as baritone Justin Ryan (the disputative first-mate Starbuck), tenor Noah Stewart (Greenhorn) and bass Ashraf Sewailam (Queequeg). At center stage was the gravel-voiced tenor Richard Cox (Captain Ahab), pegleg and all.

Heggie-Scheer dispensed with all notions of Nantucket scenes or land-locked love interests, as their opera already runs to three hours. Scheer carried forward the eloquent Shakespearean influences in Melville's book. The sole concession to the other gender is the role of the ill-fated cabin-boy Pip, sung and played with mobility and coloratura by the habile soprano

Jasmine Habersham.

You had to come away mightily impressed by the conducting of Music Director Joseph Marcheso, who brought out the rich variety of very listenable Heggie orchestration (particularly eloquent in the fantasy just before intermission) while carefully cuing the singers throughout.

In the vocal parts, the lyrical act-one Ahab aria of “Blush like Wine” is a counterpart to the Pleiades Aria in Britten’s “Peter Grimes.” In Part Two, Ahab comes back with his “Heartless God” solo, followed by an *a capella* aria by Greenhorn, not long after the opera’s best duet linking the contrasting Greenhorn with Bip. And among the choruses, the rousing “We Are One” near the final curtain is worth excerpting.

Noteworthy is the iron-man feat of these singers. Instead of having a second cast when curtains are a mere 16 hours apart, this cast led by Richard Cox is singing straight through. In nautical terms, damn the torpedoes!!

The opening-night audience response to ‘Moby Dick’ responding enthusiastically to the production speaks well for OSJ’s daring here, overcoming the old saw that South Bay audiences shy away from anything modern in serious music.

MUSIC NOTES—“Moby Dick” and Melville were largely forgotten in his time till the Melville centennial of 1919, more than a half-century after the novel was published. Today the book is considered one of the landmarks of 19<sup>th</sup>-century American literature....The opera by San Franciscan Heggie, 57, had led to one of the few famous bloopers uttered by General Director David Gockley of the S.F. Opera. Announcing an SFO production early this decade, Gockley told a press conference, “We will present ‘Moby Dick,’ with tenor Ben Heppner in the title role.” As the whale?? There was a stunned silence, then gales of laughter—no tenor alive could ever grow a girth to

match the great white whale. An embarrassed Gockley quickly retracted the misattribution and recast Heppner as Ahab...This is a co-production of five companies, including Chicago and Barcelona.

“Moby Dick” (2010), the Heggie-Scheer opera, by Opera San Jose. California Theater, 345 S. First St., San Jose, through Feb. 24. For info: (408) 437-4450, or [go online](#).

Click to share our review:



< NEXT

Pianist: The Father Of Us All?

PREVIOUS >

Where There's Hope, There's Life

Comments are closed.

Search ...

## CATEGORIES

Ballet
Chamber Music
Chorus
Dance
Ensemble
Modern Music
Music Theater
New Music
Opera
Oratorio
Recital
Symphony
Theater
Uncategorized

artssf.com, the independent observer of San Francisco Bay Area music and dance

## RECENT POSTS

MOVING STORY BALLET; OTHERS, NOT SO MOVING

Pianist: The father of us all?

'Moby Dick' a hit despite Absent Whale

Where There's Hope, There's Life

Berkeley Symphony: Equality and Premieres