

# Voce di meche

*We are here to encourage the development of gifted young singers and to stimulate the growth of New York City's invaluable chamber opera companies. But we will not neglect the Metropolitan Opera either. Get ready for bouquets and brickbats.*

Friday, June 5, 2015

## MARIO! SU!



Hugo Vera, Thomas Woodman, and Edgar Jaramillo (photo by Robert J. Saferstein)



Regina Grimaldi (photo by Robert J. Saferstein)

Why do we love Puccini's *Tosca* so much? For starters, the melodramatic story moves forward at a rapid pace with no ridiculous twists and turns or irrelevant side-plots. The characters, although larger than life, have emotions with which we can identify--love, lust, terror, protectiveness, rage, and defiance.

The power mad Baron Scarpia will stop at nothing to possess the famous singer Floria Tosca. She is in love with the church painter Mario Cavaradossi, and her intense jealousy is turned against her by Scarpia. Mario is a good soul, torn between fear of the authorities and the wish to protect his friend Cesare Angelotti, in political disfavor and hunted by the police.

We had just read Fred Plotkin's persuasive argument against titles at the opera and last night at Chelsea Opera's production, we had an opportunity to enjoy *Tosca* as a site-specific work without titles, focusing instead, as Mr. Plotkin suggested, on the music.

Fortunately, we are sufficiently familiar with Luigi Illica and Giuseppe Giacosa's superb *libretto* that we did not need the titles. We are not sure how audience members felt if they were not so familiar with the story, but we suspect that Lynne Hayden-Findlay's direction and the fine acting of the ensemble made everything clear.

Thus it was that we were able to focus our attention strictly on the music and how well Puccini's melodies followed the words of the libretto. We also appreciated a certain unity of the score with motives occurring and recurring and bouncing between singer and orchestra.

Conductor Samuel McCoy is of the restrained type but that was no impediment to his pulling an arresting propulsive performance from the excellent Chelsea Opera Chamber Orchestra. Karen Stern's harp frequently compelled our attention.

The singers all gave honorable performances. As the eponymous heroine, soprano Regina Grimaldi used all her assets in a deeply moving performance. There was a generosity to her acting that managed to match the amplitude of her voice. Since her performance was perfumed with that "garlic" that we love, let us call it "*l'abbondanza*". Every facial expression and bodily gesture was consonant and *à propos*. Her "*Vissi d'Arte*" was memorable.

On the same page was tenor Edgar Jaramillo who always sings from deep within his soul and evokes our sympathy for whatever character he portrays. Here, he created a character we could believe in, every emotion showing on his expressive face and in his expressive voice. He has a warm Latin sound with excellent phrasing. "*E lucevan le stelle*" was heartbreaking.

Bass-baritone Thomas Woodman as the evil Baron Scarpia, Chief of Police, leered while his agent Spoletta (tenor Hugo Vera) sneered. Both of them were so convincing that we felt fear just sitting there on those hard wooden pews. (Yes, that is the price one pays for enjoying such excellent productions by the Chelsea Opera).

We also enjoyed bass-baritone Brace Negron's frantic performance as the terror-stricken Angelotti. Baritone Jared Guest made a fine jailor in the third act while bass-baritone Luis Alvarado created a believable Sacristan in the first act. Baritone James Shaffran sang the role of another police agent. Benjamin Barham-Wiese appeared as the shepherd whose simple solo introduces the third act. For unknown reasons, he sang onstage but may as well have been an offstage voice.

The staging of the opera made good use of St. Peter's Church, what with the private chapel for Angelotti to hide in, candles, and crosses; everything was put to good use. This served to foster the illusion that the first act was happening in real time and a real place.

Not only did Ms. Hayden-Findlay do a great job directing but also with the costume design, with major contributions from the Theater Development Fund costume collection. There was no doubt that we were in the early 19th c.; the opera premiered at the beginning of the 20th c. and here we are enjoying it in the 21st c. The minimal set was provided by Leonarda Priore who, along with Ms. Hayden-Findlay co-founded Chelsea Opera over a decade ago.

The chorus made a significant contribution, led by Chorus Master Dean William Buck who is better known as the Conductor of Loft Opera.

There will be an afternoon performance on Saturday but tickets are scarce. Word has gotten out about Chelsea Opera's splendid productions and the church was packed from front to back.

(c) meche kroop