

UNITED STAGES



Gianni Schicchi

November 8th, 2007 – November 10th, 2007
Chelsea Opera
346 West 20th Street

CHELSEA OPERA

Could opera be alive, well and living in Chelsea? Any doubts I may have had were happily laid to rest on a past Saturday at Chelsea Opera's performance of Puccini's Gianni Schicchi at St. Peter's Church on West 20th St. Co-founders Lynne Hayden-Findlay and Leanarda Priore offered a wonderfully different way to enjoy live performance of the operatic repertoire: an intimate and inviting setting, beautiful music beautifully sung and played, and staging and production values that took full advantage of the space without ever detracting from the centrality of the music.

There was a warm, welcoming feeling to the whole afternoon, which started with a brief "pre-opera conversation" with opera maven and broadcaster Lou Santacroce. Pitched perfectly, as it were, the talk provided just enough background about the opera's story and composer to enhance appreciation of the work without ever making me feel as though I'd somehow stumbled into a classroom lecture. After a brief intermission, the performance began.

Gianni Schicchi was written as the third in a trilogy of one-act operas called *Il Trittico* (Italian for *The Triptych*). It's an immensely popular piece, and Puccini's only comic opera. As the story opens we find ourselves in 1299, in the bed-chamber of the dying Buoso Donati, an elderly Florentine nobleman whose cousins, in-laws and their various spouses and offspring are theatrically mourning his impending death while really just waiting around for the old man to die so they can divide his fortune. Almost immediately, the relatives show their true colors and frantically search the dying man's room to get a look at his will and, if necessary, alter it in their favor. Turns out, as it happens, it's necessary.

Against this background a second plot unfolds (it's opera after all, so there has to be a love story): Rinuccio, a young, handsome Donati (and, of course, a tenor, dashingly sung at Saturday's matinee by Brandon McReynolds) desperately wants to marry Lauretta, daughter of the devious lawyer Gianni Schicchi (baritone E. Philip Schneider, in a masterfully comic performance), whom the Donati clan disdains as beneath their social station, and who is in any case too poor to give his daughter the necessary dowry. Rinuccio's aunt Zita (the lovely and golden-voiced mezzo LaToya Lain) forbids any mention of the Schicchi family, unaware that her nephew has already summoned Gianni to come to their aid. Dismissed and insulted by the entire Donati family, Schicchi refuses even to try to help until the beautiful Lauretta threatens to throw herself into the Arno River if her father won't help her marry her beloved Rinuccio. Needless to say, this ridiculous and petulant threat is sung (gorgeously by soprano Lucy Finkel) in one of the best-loved of Puccini's soaring melodies, *O mio babbino caro*.

Eventually the cunning Schicchi devises a plot to fix the will of old Donati (who, by this point, has already died), as well as double-cross the greedy relatives. Gianni becomes wealthy, the young lovers are able to unite and just within an hour we've had a delightful and memorable time at the opera!

Extremely well sung and acted, the production enjoyed a cast of supporting players with voices and presence that combine to create a cohesive ensemble not often seen on the opera stage. Supported by a twenty-piece orchestra ably conducted by Carmine Aufiero and directed by Laura Alley, Chelsea Opera's Gianni Schicchi reminded this opera-fan-on-a-budget once again why I'm glad to be a New Yorker.



Baritone E. Philip Schneider (in white shirt) gives "a masterfully comic performance" in Chelsea Opera's Gianni Schicchi.
Photo by Jared Flood