

Chelsea Opera's Production of Puccini's "Suor Angelica" June 7, 2009 &
"Women Extraordinaire" June 6, 2009

The Met and City Opera are on hiatus for the summer, and the Amato has shut its doors forever, but opera is alive and well at St Peter's Church on West 20th Street where Chelsea Opera presents first-rate, fully staged productions just a seven minute stroll from the 18th Street subway station. Founded in 2004 by singers Leonarda Priore and Lynn Hayden-Findlay, the company's goal is to make opera attractive, affordable and accessible to a broad spectrum of the community while giving both seasoned and emerging singers the opportunity to advance their artistry. They achieve the former by presenting full-length works with chamber-sized orchestras at attractive prices (a ceiling of \$45 during evening performances; a low of \$20 for the Sunday matinee), and the latter by pairing seasoned artists like Placido Domingo protégé Daniel Rodriguez next to Classical Singer Competition winner Maryann Mootos in a 2006 "Pagliacci" and, most recently, Kirsten Allegri – a young veteran with nearly 30 roles to her credit – and recent winner of the Concours International de Chant Marmande Lot-et Garonne et de la Region Aquitaine Elizabeth Beers Kataria. Along the way, Chelsea Opera has garnered good notices from publications as diverse as Classical Singer Magazine and The New York Times, while playing a critical role in furthering several promising careers. Coming off last season's brilliant new production of Moore's "Baby Doe" and the double bill of Hoiby's "The Scarf" and Walton's "The Bear," Priore and Hayden-Findlay celebrated their fifth anniversary on June 4 – 7 by mounting a new production of their flagship opera, Puccini's "Suor Angelica" with rotating casts.

Briefly, the opera's central character is a young nun who has been banished to a convent by her upper class family after bearing a child out of wedlock. Here, she is celebrated by the other nuns for her expertise with herbal remedies and a sunny disposition that hides a profound sorrow. One day, she is visited by her aunt, La Zia Principessa, a woman so severe and contemptuous of Angelica and the "disgrace" she has brought up on the family that she will not so much as glance at her niece while demanding that she "atone" for her "sin" by signing away her inheritance rights in favor of her younger sister. When Angelica asks for news of her son, she learns that the boy has been dead for two years. In despair, Angelica mixes a potion of deadly herbs and drinks it off. Instantly, she is stricken with remorse at having committed "the unpardonable sin" and prays to the Virgin for forgiveness. Dying, she is granted the pardon she seeks in the form of a vision of the Mother of God standing protectively by the son she will meet in Heaven.

Because "Suor Angelica" is essentially a work for three vocalists and a chorus, the opera demands an extraordinary amount of talent from its principals, and the singers saddled with bringing Angelica, Zia and Genovieffa to life during the Sunday matinee did not disappoint. Soprano Elizabeth Beers Kataria in the title role has the most difficult task of the three; she is on stage for the entire opera, and must run the entire gamut of emotions in a little under an hour. Kataria ought to have quite a career before her, for she negotiated the twists and turns in Angelica's character without a hitch, changing from feigned cheerfulness to fevered hope to fearful anxiety without difficulty, and

culminating in a shattering performance of the pivotal “Senza Mamma” which she traversed with an ease that belied its difficulty, reducing several members of the audience members to tears in the process.

La Zia Principessa, a role written for contralto, seems to lie comfortably in the mezzo range, at least when Chelsea Opera co-founder Leonarda Priore confronts the niece who has offended the character’s delicate views of right and wrong. Zia is often played as a cold, unfeeling woman whose moral outrage at Angelica’s “sin” runs so deep that she cannot even bare to look at the niece who has brought dishonor upon the family; an 18th century Jimmy Swaggert, railing at the moral failure of others with a lack of Christian compassion that, in the end, marks her as the greatest sinner of all. Priore, however, succeeds in bringing a spark of humanity to the character, both as singer and actress. This is a role that places great demands upon the vocalist; it is no exaggeration to say that one false move could turn the entire encounter between Angelica and her aunt into a hysterical screaming match. But the Zia is a person who is used to having her way; she is practiced at the art of control. Even when she breathes fire at Angelica for daring to mention her mother’s name, it is a calculated fury, ferocity designed to achieve a calculated end. Priore rose to the occasion in a powerful, flawless performance, exercising complete control over her abilities as both singer and actress. In the process, she gave us a glimpse of a Zia who, seeing the devastation her intolerance has wrought, may now be experiencing a change of heart. It lent credence to the opera’s closing tableau in which the Zia, rather than the Madonna, reunites the dying Angelica with her son, and provided an interesting take on the character and the opera that worked surprisingly well.

As Suor Genovieffa, soprano Susan Holsonbake has the smallest of the major roles. Nonetheless, her turn as the reassuring Sister Genevieve left a memorable impression, providing a believable voice of comfort and compassion at every turn.

Each of “Suor Angelica’s” four performances began with a curtain-riser designed to give some of the talented singers who labor in the opera’s chorus an opportunity to strut their own vocal stuff. The revue was called “Women Extraordinaire,” and extraordinary indeed were some of the women who sang familiar arias and duets showcasing the diversity of la femme opera. On Saturday, this portion of the evening belonged to mezzo Kristen Allegri, who opened the program with soprano Casey Hutchinson in an absolutely brilliant “Viens, Mallika, les lianes en fleurs” from Delibes’ “Lakme,” and returned solo later in the program for a frenzied rendition of “Give him this orchid” from Britten’s “Rape of Lucretia.” If Allegri keeps this up, it won’t be long before she garners a reputation as the first great mezzo of the 21st century! Other extraordinary singers of note were soprano Elizabeth Halliday, who offered Laetitia’s “What a curse it is for a woman” from Menotti’s “Old Maid and the Thief,” and mezzo Darcy Dunn, who’s turn as Meg in “Things change, Jo” from Adamo’s “Little Women” mark her as a singer to watch.

Chelsea Opera is living proof that there is no longer any “off-season” when it comes to the world’s greatest art form. With or without the major companies, opera is alive and well in New York City.

Lou Santacroce is the former producer and host of National Public Radio’s “At the Opera.” He has given pre-performance talks for a number of opera companies and groups, including Chelsea Opera, Baltimore Lyric Opera, Washington National Opera, Washington DC Wagner Society, OASIS Club of Lord & Taylor Stores, Sylvan Opera Festival, A.G.E ElderHostel and Chelsea Opera, and was a Guest Lecturer at Widener University, Chester, Pennsylvania. He has written for Washington National Opera Magazine and the Baltimore Opera Program Guide. His column, *Lou Santacroce’s Joy of Music*, appeared weekly at LastUnicorn.com from February 2005 – August 2006. He has recently completed two screenplays.