

# SAN DIEGO STORY

Reviewing San Diego's Professional Performing Arts

## San Diego Opera: 50 Down and 50 to Go



[Ken Herman](#) Jan 25, 2015



**Harold Meers and Alyson Cambridge** [photo (c) Ken Howard]

For anyone in search of historical symmetry, San Diego Opera's season-opening production of Puccini's *La bohème* Saturday (Jan. 24) at Civic Theatre certainly filled the bill: 50 years ago in the same theater San Diego's fledgling company chose the same opera as its inaugural offering. But the emotional energy that pulsed through the exuberant, sold-out house Saturday had nothing to do with nostalgic glances at past glories.

From the sustained thunderous ovation given Chief Operating Officer Keith A. Fisher and new Board President Carol Lazier as they welcomed the audience before the opera began, it was clear these opera patrons were celebrating the resurrection of a company whose former leadership a mere 10 months ago had voted it dead-in-the-water and deemed its tangible assets ready to be auctioned off to the highest bidder.

The curtain rose on a vibrant ensemble production whose sole innovation was to move the time of the story from 1890s Paris to the City of Light in the midst of the Great Depression. British designer and stage director Isabella Bywater created a somber set whose dark hues and shadows dispensed memories of the too cheery, children's storybook set by John Conklin that San Diego recycled for

decades. Her concept gave credibility to the dire straits of these starving artists and workers, providing Puccini's most *verismo* work a welcome reprieve from time's sentimental upgrading.



**Harold Meers & Morgan Smith** [photo (c) Ken Howard]

This cast skillfully navigated the composer's delicate balance of comedic diversion and tragic consequence, and Bywater's taut direction created a palpable sense of expectation, even though at this stage of the work's over exposure, there is nothing mysterious about the story's denouement. While camaraderie and vocal prowess marked the four garret-mates, baritones Morgan Smith as the earnest painter Marcello and Malcom MacKenzie as Schaunard the amiable musician stood out with muscular, resonant voices that confidently filled the room.

Although the fresh-faced Harold Meers cut a dashing, ardent Rodolfo, his appropriately Italianate



**Sara Gartland** [photo (c) Ken Howard]

lyric tenor lacked power in the composer's trademark stratospheric cadences. Similarly, as Mimi, soprano Alyson Cambridge easily wooed everyone with her creamy mid-range, but although strength

carried into her highest range, her vocal control did not. Sara Gartland's ample, bright soprano communicated Musetta's outrageous bravado as well as her tender side.

This was a fine evening for bass-baritones, with Christian Van Horn giving a nuanced account of the philosopher Colline and Scott Sikon making the two outsiders—the vain landlord Benoit and Musetta's hapless wealthy suitor Alcindoro—less buffoonish than one typically encounters.

In the crowd scene outside the Café Momus, the Children's Chorus sounded unusually crisp and well trained. Although the role of the full opera chorus merely adds to the bustle of that scene, they carried off their task with confidence.

Under the baton of Resident Conductor Karen Keltner, the orchestra revealed the deft, impressionist textures of Puccini's score with fluid clarity. It was recently announced that after the last performance of *La bohème*, Keltner will retire from her position with the company. Her swan song could not have been more gracefully executed, nor the orchestra more keenly attentive to her direction.

Bywater's costumes cleverly suggested attire that was once fashionable now making do in hard times, although Musetta sported classy knit suits that only a young person supported by a rich suitor might afford. I was amused that Mimi's cherished pink bonnet was turned into a chic pink beret. *Thomas C. Hase's subdued lighting design complemented Bywater's stark unit set, which cleverly turned into different scenes with the curtain up. The second-floor garret room turned 180 degrees to open out as the bar and interior of the Café Momus, and the garret's stairway—an important aspect of the plot on two crucial occasions—turned to become the third act toll station.*



**Morgan Smith (l. to r.), Harold Meers, Alyson Cambridge, Malcolm MacKenzie & Christian Van Horn**  
[photo (c) Ken Howard]

Whether this was a first-timer's *La bohème* or the aficionado's 21<sup>st</sup> time, this production adroitly engaged the gamut of the audience.

San Diego Opera's production of Puccini's *La bohème* opened at the San Diego Civic Theatre on January 24, 2015, at 7:00 p.m. and will be repeated on January 27 & 29 at the same hour. The final performance is Sunday, February 1, 2015, at 2:00 p.m.