

Monday, May 7, 2007 - 12:00 AM



ROZARII LYNCH

Rosario La Spina's singing seemed an odd fit for his Rodolfo, while soprano Nuccia Focile's performance as Mimi was a triumph.



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Saturday night's cast, above, and Sunday afternoon's alternate cast made for a unique contrast in the way Puccini's "La Bohème" could be performed. The show was successful both ways. That's what makes the double casts so interesting.

Opera Review

Gem of a La Bohème at Seattle Opera

By Melinda Bargreen

Seattle Times music critic

"La Bohème" is such a well-crafted opera that it can survive almost any production. And Seattle Opera isn't serving up just any production.

The show, which opened Saturday night, is a gem in which handsome period sets, believable staging, careful casting and exuberant conducting all combine to great effect.

This "Bohème" is a triumph for soprano Nuccia Focile, who has the role of Mimi right down to the flutter of an eyelash. She is an affecting, tender singer who ascends far above the usual dying-waif clichés. Focile's Mimi is all vulnerability mixed with impetuous flirtation; she is naive and knowing all at once. She sings with a passionate abandon but also with a gorgeous delicacy, floating the most fragile lines in the aria "Addio, senza rancor." This is a portrayal that will linger long in the memory. But it isn't just Focile's show. This "Bohème" is an ensemble piece in which the action — and there's a lot of it — speeds along at an effortlessly natural pace, thanks to stage director Jose Maria Condemni. He has done a brilliant job of sorting out an impossibly busy melee of street vendors, kids, a parade with a band, and all the Bohemians in Act II.

Review

McCaw Hall, Seattle Center, Saturday night and Sunday afternoon

Conдеми keeps the acting natural, perfectly attuned to both music and libretto, making good use of the handsome Pier Luigi Pizzi sets (from the Chicago Lyric Opera). The lighting, by Thomas C. Hase, is very effective.

And the orchestra is in the very able hands of Vjekoslav Sutej, whose impassioned, flexible conducting underscored the lively moments as well as the scenes of deep pathos. He gave the singers time, particularly in the touching last act, and backed off the orchestra to accommodate the delicacy of the music.

All six of the Bohemian roles are double-cast, suggesting an unusual degree of care for details.

Repeat performances

Puccini's "La Bohème," in a Seattle Opera production with Vjekoslav Sutej conducting. Ten performances remaining through May 20 (opening-night cast on Wednesday, Saturday and May 16, 18 and 19; alternate cast on Tuesday, Friday, Sunday and May 15 and 20). Marion Oliver McCaw Hall, Seattle Center; \$51-\$141 (206-389-7676 or www.seattleopera.org).

Singing opposite Focile's Mimi as Rodolfo was tenor Rosario La Spina, whose opening aria made it clear that this was not his night. Veering sharp and tight above the staff, La Spina nonetheless had some beautiful moments, and he proved a very able actor; but through much of the performance the role seemed an odd fit for his voice — which was neither high nor light enough to muster the effects Puccini's score requires.

Philip Cutlip's Marcello was right on target, warmly sung and ardently acted, opposite the firebrand Musetta of Karen Driscoll. Colline and Schaunard were both well characterized by Deyan Vatchkov and Jeremy Kelly, respectively, with Tony Dillon doing a pair of fine comic turns in the roles of Benoit and Alcindoro. Noah Baetge had only a few notes as Parpignol, but they were good ones.

On Sunday, the alternate cast featured German soprano Gun-Brit Barkmin as Mimi, in a passionate, all-out performance that made her total involvement in the music clear. Scott Piper's impetuous, lyrical Rodolfo was a good match for her. Neither singer was completely secure at the very top of their respective registers, but they both made intelligent use of their vocal assets.

Michael Todd Simpson sang well as an appropriately fiery Marcello, paired with the high-powered Musetta of Margarita De Arellano. Ashraf Sewailam and Marcus DeLoach made favorable impressions as Colline and Schaunard, respectively.

Two very fine casts, two completely different ensembles — and the show works each way. That's what makes these double casts so interesting.

A round of cheers for the Seattle Opera Chorus (and its fine Youth Chorus, with young soloist Conor Garside).

Tickets to the remaining shows are going fast. Just remember to bring your hankies; this one has a deathbed scene to wring the heart.

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