

Published: Friday, May 11, 2007

Seattle Opera 'Boheme' has even more energy

The treatment of Puccini's popular masterpiece is a sumptuously traditional production, and a fine end to a brilliant season.

*By Mike Murray  
Special to The Herald*

SEATTLE - Occasionally opera is like a low-scoring baseball game. Just as in the middle of the sixth when you are waiting patiently for a triple play, sometimes it takes a big aria to liven things up.

That's not the case in Puccini's "La Boheme" because there are no musical down times in "Boheme." The opera is a seamless flow of glorious melodies, arias and ensembles that pour forth from the orchestra and the singers, without pause, from curtain to curtain.

No wonder that "Boheme," with its tender and tragic love story, is among the most popular of all operas. Seattle Opera brings this masterpiece to life in a silky smooth production that opened Saturday night and plays through May 20. It's a fitting close to what has been a great season for the company.

Puccini's story of love and loss among the starving artists of Paris is presented here in a straightforward, traditional production that befits this heartfelt story. They may be starving Bohemians, but Puccini's characters experience the joys of youth and love and the grief of death in a universal way that we can all relate to.

It's a visually sumptuous production, with atmospheric sets by Pier Luigi Pizzi for Lyric Opera of Chicago. The garret, where the poet Rodolfo feeds pages from his play into the stove to fight the cold, is bathed in the gray light of a Parisian winter. It's here that Rudolfo first meets Mimi, the lovely seamstress who takes joy in the simplest of life's pleasures even as she slowly succumbs to tuberculosis.

The second act in Cafe Momus is an eye-popping, crowd-filled scene of Paris cafe society. (Among the revelers is 13-year-old Conor Garside of Mukilteo, in the Youth Choir). The scene is nearly upstaged by the brilliant gold dress worn by Musetta. She may seem a gold digger, but Musetta has a heart of gold, and her show-stopping "Musetta's Waltz" is a musical highlight.

Snow falls in a wintry garden in Act III as suffering Mimi and Rodolfo, crazed with worry, pledge their love. The final act finds us back in the Bohemians' garret where Mimi, too weak to climb the stairs, is carried to her deathbed by her grief-stricken friends.

Jose Maria Condemi's nuanced stage direction is a cohesive, no-nonsense approach in which everything works dramatically to the service of the story and the singers. **Kudos to lighting designer Thomas C. Hase for effective work.**

Conductor Vjekoslav Sutej seemed to be channeling Puccini on opening night, producing a groundswell of music to suit the many moods of this opera.

Lyric soprano Nuccia Focile has made Mimi a signature role in a distinguished career, and it showed in her affecting portrayal in the opening-night cast. She is a lovely Mimi with a creamy, velvety sound that caressed the music and deep understanding of the role that only years of experience can bring.

Her Rodolfo, tenor Rosario La Spina in his company debut, sounded tight in the early going but his voiced bloomed reassuringly with a ringing sound in the high notes in "Che gelida manina," his big first-act aria.

Elsewhere, baritone Philip Cutlip as Marcello and soprano Karen Driscoll as Musetta did rock-solid work in the other principal roles, with strong supporting work from Deyan Vatchkov and Jeremy Kelly as Colline and Schaunard.

Rozarii Lynch photo

Nuccia Focile and Rosario La Spina in "La Boheme."

**Copyright ©1996-2007.**  
The Daily Herald Co.  
ALL RIGHTS RESERVED.