

## Seattle Opera Singers Enjoy Flawless Support in *La Bohème*

By *Gavin Borchert*



Conspicuous consumption: La Spina and Focile.  
Roz Ariilynych

**La Bohème** Seattle Opera at McCaw Hall, Seattle Center, 389-7676, [www.seattleopera.org](http://www.seattleopera.org). \$51–\$141. Ends May 20.

**Seattle Opera's** handsome, impressively crafted *La Bohème* provides an ideal frame for the singers to work in. Director Jose Maria Condemi gives us the piece straight and unstylized, with Pier Luigi Pizzi's sets and Martin Pakledinaz's costumes traditional to the last nail and stitch. **Lighting designer Thomas C. Hase shows off as much as the cast, with a sunset in Act 1, a starry night in Act 2, and, loveliest of all, a pearly gray winter dawn in Act 3.** Supporting the singers just as solicitously is conductor Vjekoslav Sutej, leading a radiant Seattle Symphony.

Nuccia Focile has sung Mimi—the love-susceptible, consumptively doomed heroine of Puccini's crew of picturesquely penniless artists—in over 20 productions, and her experience is reflected in the character. This Mimi is definitely more worldly, more pragmatic, and possibly a bit older than her moody, puppyish boyfriend, Rodolfo. In that role, Rosario La Spina boasts a voice of attractive timbre and heart-stirring carrying power, but he's not yet entirely master of it, with noticeable issues of breath control (his phrases ended when his air supply did) and volume control (climactic notes leapt suddenly out from the musical line as if some sound engineer had accidentally twisted a knob). His decision to interpolate a high C at the end of the first act, as some tenors like to do, was ill-advised. No matter how gracefully the note is floated, it never sounds as pretty as the one Puccini wrote, an E harmonizing with Mimi's high C.

Deyan Vatchkov and Jeremy Kelly contribute vivid character work as the philosophy student Colline and the musician Schaunard—one tall and gaunt, one shorter and rounder, looking quite a bit like Berlioz and Schubert, as it happens. Philip Cutlip's Marcello makes a bold foil for La Spina's more introspective, wistful Rodolfo, though he shared less chemistry with the Musetta of Karen Driscoll, working much too hard at coquettishness.

Nevertheless, this production expertly realized so many of those moments that make the 90-minute opera beloved—Rodolfo and Mimi's meeting and love duet, the festive second-act crowd scenes, her death and the tragic curtain—living and breathing just as a *Bohème* ought to do. More, actually: It left me not only thoroughly engaged but freshly amazed at what a supreme example of music-theater workmanship this is. How did Puccini and his librettists manage to balance romance, comedy, pathos, and local color so neatly in a form so intricately detailed yet so concise?