

Los Angeles Times

May 19, 2008

OPERA REVIEW

Opera: This Tosca leads the Puccini parade with purity

Newcomer Adrienne Pieczonka joins original tenor Neil Shicoff and veteran Juan Pons in the Puccini favorite by L.A. Opera.

By Mark Swed, Times Music Critic

Come Dec. 22, celebrations of Puccini's 150th birthday may abound. But, generally, opera companies are not making the fuss typical of major anniversaries of popular (and even unpopular) composers this year. Or perhaps the companies are. It can be hard to tell, given how common are "La Boheme," "Madame Butterfly" and "Tosca."

Still, Los Angeles Opera is doing a little more than most. Saturday night it began a spring-summer-fall Puccini parade with "Tosca," which will be followed by "La Rondine" next month. A new season in September opens with an attention-getting "Il Trittico" (new productions of the triptych that will be shared by Woody Allen and William Friedkin). Robert Wilson "Madame Butterfly" returns to the Dorothy Chandler Pavilion in October.

The company's "Tosca" has been around. Ian Judge's regularly revived production is 19 years old and returns with its original tenor, Neil Shicoff, and veteran Juan Pons. But Tosca is new: Adrienne Pieczonka sang the role for the first time Saturday. The Canadian soprano will surely be singing it for a long time. She was radiant.

Tosca's blood is meant to run hot all the time. Puccini even hesitated about including the opera's most famous aria, "Vissi d'Arte," for the simple reason that his lead character, a diva sucked into Roman politics, had no time for reflection. On her plate at this crucial moment in the second act is sexual compromise and murder. Who thinks about a life spent in the service of art at such a moment?

Pieczonka brings a youthful sound to a heavy *verismo* role. She has no choice but to emote a melodramatic storm in a traditional production, but her acting remains on the refreshingly refined side. She has, however, her work cut out for her.

She is loaded down with Maria Callas' jewelry, which Swarovski is shipping around to companies. And she is loaded down with a lover -- the painter and revolutionary Cavaradossi -- sung by an unapologetically emotion-laden romantic of the old school. The Brooklyn-born tenor Shicoff ladled the pathos on thick. He likes to hang on to high notes, and there were times Saturday when he was but a microsecond away from outright vulgarity.

But nothing fazed Pieczonka nor tempted her toward unseemly grandeur. When she stabs the Baron Scarpia, the police chief who has imprisoned Cavaradossi and demands sex from Tosca for his release, the Baron falls on top of her and she has to wiggle awkwardly out from under him. She jumps from the parapet at the end as if onto a trampoline, and one half expects to see her bounce right back up again.

But she held the stage well enough and sang with effortless purity and impeccable taste. The conductor Richard Armstrong put a high premium on precision in the orchestra and, at its best, including "Vissi d'Arte," the performance approached the moving intimacy of chamber music.

This was hardly the case, though, with Shicoff and Pons. The tenor, who was said to have had a case of food poisoning, had been unable to finish the dress rehearsal. Before the performance, the company announced that Shicoff would be singing, though still indisposed. Vocally, he had his rough patches, but he also spent freely on his money notes. Whether they are to one's taste, they do make a sob a sob and added to Cavaradossi's political defiance.

Pons' Scarpia was blunt but not without finesse. The Spanish baritone too can sound raw around the edges but not so much as to make a listener doubt that the police chief was an immovable object of malice.

The smaller parts were not carefully cast for this revival. John Gunter's set, which places the scenes within the frame of a painting, looked dated, and the lighting was dull.

But the orchestra was full of color. Armstrong could be headstrong -- snail-paced for most of the arias, slashing through the score elsewhere. But he took great care with details and vividly brought out the most sophisticated elements of Puccini's music.

A decade ago, the British conductor led Wagner's "Tristan and Isolde" at the Music Center and it sounded like mush. Now the orchestra has a sparkle to make Swarovski envious.

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