

# LYRIC OPERA

KANSAS CITY

## LA BOHÈME

Giacomo Puccini 1896

March 15, 17, 19, 21, 23, 2014

### "La bohème" is an inspired success

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In the visually and acoustically superior space that is the

Kauffman Center for the Performing Arts, expectations are high for world-class productions that host remarkable talent. The Lyric Opera of Kansas City offered up Puccini's *La Bohème* in a stylish production that featured brilliant singing, impeccable orchestral support, smart choreography, and lavish visual effects. In charge of some of these pertinent components were newcomers to the Lyric, like lighting designer Steve Ross and conductor Craig Kier, and each contributed their personal stamp to the show.

The Lyric's was an elegant take on Puccini's 19th-century warhorse, and the company created it without braving unnecessary liberties with setting or timing. Still, with thoughtful attention to movement, affect, and imagery, director Linda Brovsky shaped for this production a fresh vision for what the masterwork has to offer.

One of the most noticeable aspects of the score is how recurring musical motives weave in and around each character and event. Although not complex like Wagnerian leitmotifs, there still results a web of melodic material that has one musical idea seamlessly emerging from another, so that the cumulative effect is a sort of musico-dramatic surface of music that carries familiar themes across all four acts. Through that continuity, one melodic formula can stand for various things: a melody that in Act 1 represents hope can in Act 3 reflect on that pure optimism, or even signal resignation or lament about a significant turning of events. Puccini's re-workings are vital to novice and veteran opera-goers alike, since more complex thematic development would take too much time in a story like this one, which moves at a brisk pace.

It was clear from the start that Giorgi Berrugi and Lucas Meachem would be a formidable pair. Meachem proved a powerful actor who immediately commanded the stage. As the ideal Marcello, Meachem was a physical and dramatic force, rivaling Berrugi (Rodolfo) and even Van Kooten (Mimi) for audience sympathies. Along with outstanding sidekicks Ben Wager (whose admirably resonant and responsive bass made for a stand-out Colline) and Marcus DeLoach (as a certifiably believable Schaunard), an instant camaraderie. In Act 1 comes the beloved "Che gelida manina," where Rodolfo sings to his neighbor Mimi,

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and the aria gave Berrugi an edge in distinguishing himself from this manly clan. Berrugi, in his United States debut, boasted the perfect leading-man timbre, and his tenor voice was resonant across the hall. Berrugi acts capably as well, conveying a welcome naturalness, even if I did sense a bit of tension and some breath control compromises in one isolated spot of this number. It was, though, nothing that soaring Puccini lyricism and orchestral doubling could not remedy, and the aria still did what Puccini placed it there to do: provide the young couple the seven minutes flat they needed to fall madly, totally in love.

Katie Van Kooten's first utterances as Mimi were perfectly hesitant, perhaps to symbolize both her fragile physical state and the unsteady position she would soon be in. I appreciated what seemed to be a most deliberate acting scheme: Van Kooten started off a bit economically, even perhaps a bit stingy with the audience, doling out the vocal acrobats in measured portions. When the audience got Mimi unleashed in Act 3 (with "O buon Marcello, aiuto!"), they were better able grasp the dramatic import of Mimi's personal journey. From Act 3 through to the death bed scene, Van Kooten allowed this carefully constructed Mimi to show the uncommon strength which defines this special character, so that even as the audience watched Mimi deteriorate, strong singing belied her inner strength.

Ellie Dehn as Musetta remains a puzzle. Her entrance in Act 2 was for me too affected: her voice came across as bound and rigid, and her antics flighty to a fault. In portraying Musetta to the extremes of her self-absorbed persona, Dehn missed the opportunity to just sing. In the subdued atmosphere of the final scenes came her best work, when Dehn exploited Musetta's tender, human qualities in a warmer soprano; these moments balanced her exaggerated entrance.

Although well aware of the limits of this art form, I always crave some amount of believability in opera. This story, though, does not develop gradually, and substantial chunks of time are dispensed with between acts. It is thus the actors' job to anchor the audience in some truth of a real romantic connection – to parlay a credible chemistry. I had to rely more on Puccini's music to do this work, as I never grasped any real synergy between the pairs of lovers. Still, I was dismayed (and a little confused) about why this Kansas City audience, normally so demonstrative, was not overly responsive. There was such an odd hesitation after the Act 3 quartet "Addio dolce svegliare alla mattina!" that the action basically had to soldier on without pause. Not showering Van Kooten, Berrugi, Meachem, and Dehn with spontaneous applause after this expressive musical and dramatic counterpoint seemed peculiar for these normally appreciative patrons.

Opera lovers crave a new version of *La bohème* to compare to their last experience, and the Lyric's production is a worthwhile venture. R. Keith Brumley continues to make an indelible impact on the Lyric's productions, a success that originates in wise artistic (and artist) and design (and designer) choices. The results of his work were again positively spectacular. Visual elements like unexpected angles and varying heights, plus a rich sense of perspective (not to mention snowflakes) combined to transport the audience to the variety of settings that the beloved characters occupy. The stark setting for Act 3 reflected the shifts the story had taken since Act 2, and the setting for the public scene of Act 2 ideally showcased the costumes work of Martin Pakledinas and Mary Traylor, as well as the smartly choreographed and well-rehearsed chorus. Mark Ferrell is to be commended: his standards are obviously high, and his unwavering dedication to presenting a cohesive character out of a group of dynamic singers and actors (in *La bohème* he worked with boisterous children, unkempt carousers, and shivering street sweepers) pays off in every one of the Lyric's productions.