

Occidental College

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11th Annual Diva Issue

The Spectacular Nina Stemme

Sings Wagner This Season
in Milan,
Paris,
Munich,
Houston
and Vienna

BY JESSICA DUCHEN

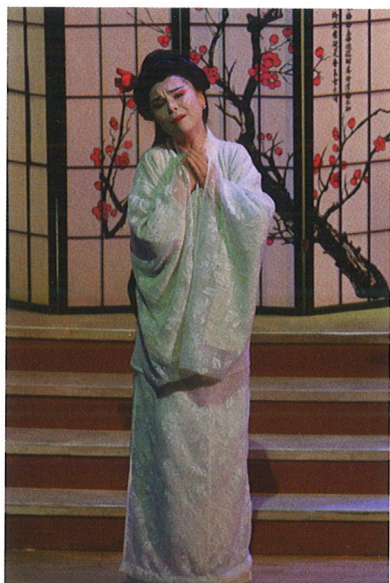
Don't Call Her Diva:
Chita Rivera

The Transformation
of Jennifer Larmore

Keeper of the Flame:
Toti Dal Monte

How to Spot
a Diva Role





Los, a "fascinating" Cio-Cio-San at PORTopera

Enhanced by effective lighting, the open set consisted of shallow steps and platforms backed by a wall of translucent framed panels that could move vertically and horizontally, allowing for a variety of stage pictures. Vaughn used the set brilliantly to create intimate moments as well as the necessary pageantry.

As Cio-Cio San, soprano Inna Los sang with power and intensity, displaying a rich middle range, as well as thrilling high notes. Her well-considered characterization was fascinating, showing Cio-Cio-San's transition from a very playful, seductive young geisha, starry-eyed about Pinkerton, to a woman who realizes the terrible reality of his rejection. Los's "Un bel dì" was notable for its dynamic range as she expressed Cio-Cio-San's desperate need to convince herself, as well as Suzuki, that a faithful Pinkerton would return. Adam Diegel's Pinkerton had the requisite casual charm in Act I, as he entered with some buddies from his ship to be shown around Butterfly's house. His strong tenor easily filled the house, and in the love duet with Butterfly he matched Los's delicate colors and sensitive phrasing.

The Suzuki of Heather Johnson was an outstanding portrayal. Her warm, expressive mezzo is ideally suited to the role, and Vaughn's staging highlighted her close relationship with Cio-Cio-San. Johnson's singing in the Act II trio was compelling, as she joined Diegel and Edward Parks's Sharpless in one of the evening's highlights, beautifully supported by Lord's shaping of the lush melodies. Parks made

a very youthful American Consul — perhaps Nagasaki was his first diplomatic posting — but his characterization grew in assurance and dignity during the course of the evening. Parks has a beautiful baritone that is ideally suited to the role, so one hopes that there will be many more Sharplesses in his future.

John McVeigh used his distinctive tenor to good effect as the manipulative Goro. Solomon Howard made a powerful impression as the Bonze, and Robert Mellon was effective as the persistent Yamadori. Eliza Bonet made the most of her brief appearance as Kate Pinkerton, and Claire Caton was a well-behaved Sorrow.

CORNELIA IREDELL

SANTA BARBARA, CA

The Rake's Progress, Igor Stravinsky's neo-classical tale of temptation, indulgence and downfall, is something of a departure for the Music Academy of the West, which in recent years has tended toward a more staid repertoire of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century warhorses. (A notable exception to this rule was the Music Academy's 2008 production of William Bolcom's *A Wedding*.) But while a few apprehensive murmurs could be heard in the moments before the curtain rose at Santa Barbara's historic Granada Theatre at the opening performance on August 3, the audience appeared to be quickly won over by the energetic cast and the skillfully executed production. Now in its sixty-fifth year, the Academy's Summer Festival brings together a group of aspiring young singers and instrumentalists for eight intensive weeks of lessons, master classes and performances, with the annual opera providing a focal point for a vocal program that has been headed by Marilyn Horne since 1997.

The young principal cast — none over the age of thirty — brought a welcome touch of freshness and vigor to the improbable collection of characters with which W. H. Auden and Chester Kallman populated their libretto. Adam Fisher made a sympathetic Tom Rakewell, with an expressive, affecting voice that gave added poignancy to the char-

acter's inexorable descent into ruin and madness. Cameron McPhail, with his powerful baritone and youthful visage, offered an affable Nick Shadow who was at once playful and sinister. Stepping in for an ill colleague on only a few hours' notice, Jessica Strong put in an impressive performance as Anne Trulove, while Kate Allen gave a compelling performance as the larger-than-life Baba the Turk.

The orchestra, under the direction of Alexander Lazarev and consisting of the Music Academy's instrumental fellows, dispatched Stravinsky's score mostly with ease, though Lazarev's uncompromisingly brisk tempos occasionally required a moment to completely solidify. The prominent harpsichord, energetically played by John Arida, was placed on a raised platform near the front of the pit, allowing the instrument to achieve an admirable balance with both the singers and orchestra without having to resort to artificial amplification.

The stage direction by David Paul was particularly effective during ensemble scenes, where the intricately planned movements of cast and chorus betrayed both thoughtfulness and attention to detail. The main set, designed by Sandra Goldmark, consisted of a monochromatic architectural façade adorned with a peculiar mélange of beaux-arts elements. More striking was the diverse assemblage of objects — from Chinese fans to an Egyptian sarcophagus — that was lowered from the fly space during Act II in order to provide the veritable cabinet of curiosities in which Tom and Baba



McPhail and Fisher, Nick Shadow and Tom Rakewell at Santa Barbara

made their not-so-happy home. While little about the set seemed to place the action firmly in a particular time or place, Stephanie Cluggish's stylish costuming suggested that the plot had been transported to the "Roaring Twenties." The staging of the final scene in *Bedlam* stopped just short of profundity, with Rakewell delivering his duet with Anne from within the confines of a stylized straitjacket, while the chorus of white-clad patients slowly writhed, sometimes distractingly, in the background. EDMOND JOHNSON

INTERNATIONAL SALZBURG

A fresh wind sweeps through the Salzburg Festival. After two short-lived interregnums, a new artistic director full of daring ideas has taken the reins: Alexander Pereira, who ran the Zurich Opera House for twenty years, has almost doubled the number of productions and extended the festival to more than six weeks. As of 2013, a new opera, commissioned by the festival, will be staged every year; old productions, on the other hand, will no longer be revived. It was even rumored that Pereira had threatened to resign if his far-reaching plans should be watered down on the basis of being too risky. Fortunately, the public gobbled up the 40,000 additional tickets, so Pereira didn't have to prove that he meant what he said.

The general excitement about the dawn of a new era notwithstanding, the four productions I saw during my three-day visit to Salzburg were pretty traditional. The most revolutionary aspect of *Die Zauberflöte* (seen Aug. 13) was that the old Mozart hand Nikolaus Harnoncourt conducted it for the first time with his period-instrument band, Concentus Musicus Wien, in the pit. The sound effortlessly filled the huge Felsenreitschule. Harnoncourt is known for his often eccentric tempos, mostly on the slow side. In the program, he profusely defended his choices. Whether one agreed with him or not, the result was beguiling.

That's hardly the word one would use to characterize the staging. Jens-Daniel Herzog, the director, and Mathis Neidhardt, the set designer, tried to overcome the notorious difficulties of the giant hall by limiting the action to a small-scale model with many doors—a practical rather than a poetic solution. Papageno appeared in a



Baby talk: Schwarz, Kleiter, Richter and Werba in Salzburg's *Zauberflöte*

three-wheeled delivery van labeled "Delicatessen." Sarastro's temple seemed to be a medical school specializing in brain research; the Speaker looked like Dr. Caligari. When Papagena, a remote-controlled doll, finally came to life and was united with Papageno, four baby carriages rolled in, indicating that the gods had answered their prayers to "reward our love with children." It was the funniest idea of an otherwise pedestrian evening. There were only a few laughs.

At the end, Sarastro didn't triumph over the Queen of the Night; they both continued to wrestle on the floor—a hint at *Das Labyrinth*, the 1798 sequel to Mozart's opera by composer Peter von Winter and librettist Emanuel Schikaneder that the Festival also dug out, and which I did not see.

The singing in *Die Zauberflöte* was on a decent level. Bernard Richter (Tamino), Julia Kleiter (Pamina) and Markus Werba (Papageno) were all fine. Georg Zeppenfeld was a somewhat lightweight Sarastro. The weak spots were Mandy Fredrich's pale Queen of the Night and Rudolf Schasching's voiceless Monostatos.

In *La Bohème* (also seen Aug. 13), the tenor was the weak link. Piotr Beczala (Rodolfo), who was indisposed for part of the run (he canceled two of his scheduled seven performances), had trouble with his

top notes. Although Anna Netrebko's voice has considerably darkened, she was still a girlish, deeply moving Mimì. Nino Machaidze was an amusing, soubrettish Musetta. To hear the overfamiliar score played by the Vienna Philharmonic, conducted by Daniele Gatti, was luxury indeed.

That Puccini's opera was staged at all was remarkable enough. Gerard Mortier, who directed the festival from 1992 to 2001, made no secret of his contempt for the most popular opera composer of the twentieth century. The last time Salzburg



Beczala and Netrebko, Rodolfo and Mimì in Salzburg

deigned to mount a Puccini opera was in 2002, when *Turandot* was offered with a new finale composed by Luciano Berio. Pereira distanced himself from his predecessor. In an interview with the Vienna daily *Die Presse*, he called Mortier's prejudice "grotesque."