

San Diego Opera Captures Hearts with Season-Opening *La Bohème*



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Soprano Alyson Cambridge is Mimi, baritone Morgan Smith Marcello and tenor Harold Meers is Rodolfo. Photo by Ken Howard.

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[San Diego:](#)

In 1893, the same year Verdi's swan song *Falstaff* premiered at La Scala, Puccini's first big hit, *Manon Lescaut*, premiered in Turin to rave reviews. Critics acclaimed "the strong opera of a young maestro who does honor to his name and his country." George Bernard Shaw declared, "Puccini looks to me more the heir of Verdi than any of his rivals." Three years later, Puccini outdid himself with his wildly successful [La bohème](#), which has since become, like Leonard Bernstein's *West Side Story*, Puccini's most popular and beloved work.

This season's glittering opening night was of special significance for [San Diego Opera](#): not only as the first full performance of its fiftieth anniversary season, but also its premiere as an energetically renewed operatic entity. The sold-out audience showed their cognizance of these facts, and of their clear appreciation of the visually stunning production and vibrant young cast, with a reception as unbridled in its fervor as that of the opera's original success.



[Soprano](#) Sara Gartland is [Musetta](#). Photo by Ken Howard.

It may have been tough for San Diegans to relate to four young guys suffering from the cold, but identifying with their trials, loves, and losses was not an issue. On the contrary, the ambiance of love, both in the sold-out audience and on stage with the youthful cast, produced abundant heat.

The debuting young singers all have major voices and performed three of the opera's major roles: sopranos **Alyson Cambridge** and **Sara Gartland** as Mimì and Musetta, and tenor **Harold Meers** as Rodolfo.

Steadfast SDO baritones **Morgan Smith** and **Malcolm MacKenzie** rounded out the cast as Marcello and Schaunard, with **Christian Van Horn** making his SDO debut as Colline and **Scott Sikon** appearing in the dual role of Alcindoro/Benoit. All of the singers showed deep psychological understanding in their interpretations of their characters' emotions and motivations.

Cambridge, who was a [Metropolitan Opera](#) National Council Auditions Grand Prize Winner, has been a frequent presence at the Met and also has appeared at other major companies in the US and abroad. Her Mimì glowed: dramatically she was superbly convincing and multifaceted, and depicted her character's transformative arc with great complexity; her voice, rich and full, showed a readiness for much heavier roles.



A scene from San Diego Opera's [LA BOHEME](#). Photo by Ken Howard.

Meers showed an impressive vocal command that undoubtedly will result in larger and more significant roles as his excellent voice grows and matures. His youth served him well in his portrayal of Mimi's significant other, Rodolfo, an idealistic young man who, now and then, experiences bursts of sanguinity. The dramatic play between these two singers heightened the vocal intensity of their duets; their moments together on stage were among the highlights of the evening.

As Rodolfo's sidekick Marcello, Morgan Smith reproduced the vocal beauty he displayed as Starbuck in SDO's 2012 *Moby-Dick*. The voice is simply gorgeous. His bursts of temperament as the archetypal volatile artist and jealous lover were wholly believable and empathetic.

A frequent performer at [San Francisco](#) Opera, with a notable appearance in the world premiere of the dramatically compelling *Heart of a Soldier*, Gartland steamed up the artists' garret windows and warmed the chilly Parisian night air with her spirited performance. Her egregious, over-the-top behavior, bordering on the offensive, came off as totally appropriate, engaging but not annoying as it often is played. Vocally Gartland was somewhat heavier than usual for a Musetta, but her top was impressively clear and full.

Always a welcome presence on any stage, with his resonant voice and lively presence, MacKenzie gave a sparkling rendition of Schaunard. The role lay perfectly in his vocal range, but the relatively brief stage appearances left one wanting to hear more. Van Horn reprised his Met Opera debut role of Colline for his SDO stage debut with imposing fullness of voice. He made the most of his important moments in his fourth act aria, which was beautifully and sensitively sung. One wishes for a similar opportunity for MacKenzie. (Perhaps a lost Schaunard aria exists, hidden somewhere in the archives of Puccini manuscripts?)

Scott Sikon, who has performed over twenty bass-[baritone](#) roles at SDO, seemed to be having a blast as Alcindoro/Benoit, and clearly was an audience favorite.



(L-R) Baritone Malcolm MacKenzie is Schaunard, bass-baritone Christian Van Horn is Colline, tenor Harold Meers is Rodolfo, bass Scott Sikon is Benoit and baritone Morgan Smith in *Marcello*. Photo by Ken Howard, 2015.

With all of the company's brand-new aspects, the season debut of this opera also serves as the beginning of the final run for SDO Resident [Conductor](#) **Karen Keltner**. In her thirty-five years with SDO, Keltner has become a mainstay of the company. Early in her career, as winner of the National Opera Institute's first apprenticeship in conducting,

Keltner helped break the glass ceiling that barred the way to a distinctive role for women in a male-dominated *métier*. In this *bohème*, she showed her partiality to and predilection for French opera by creating a convincingly French take on the music, with subtlety and elegance.

Award-nominated British [director](#) **Isabella Bywater**, who also sported the *chapeaux* of set and costume designer, made a noteworthy SDO debut, and clearly was well in charge of this production. Her alluring costumes were evocative of 1930s Paris, as were her spare but realistic sets: convincingly Spartan in the garret tableau with its stairway, doorways, and cutout room views; appropriately decadent in the second act Momus scene, with its atmosphere of dissolute smokers and casual onlookers inside the café; and ably capturing the romantic but poignant atmosphere of Paris in the snow in Act 3. Bywater accomplished the transition from Act 1 to the bustling activity on the streets in Act 2 with rotating sets that were deftly integrated into the actions of **Charles Prestinari**'s chorus, which as usual sang and projected beautifully, both in the street scenes and in the small ensembles. **Thomas Hase**'s subtle lighting designs tastefully enhanced the effect of Bywater's sets.

San Diego Opera's astonishing rebuilding and growth over the past ten months has come to represent the paradigm for [a company that is doing something right](#). The unqualified enthusiasm surrounding this operatic troupe and their determination to refashion this art form in an updated and wholly relevant image has created a buzz and unprecedented excitement about their momentous opening night. With young singers who seem destined for major careers and

repertoire that combines familiar favorites with lesser-known but relatable contemporary works, SDO has shaped a winning ensemble with wide appeal. Clearly they have something special going for them. And devoted San Diegans are turning out *en masse* to show their appreciation.